MEADOWSWEET

Baroness Orczy

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BARONESS ORCZY

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BY

BARONESS ORCZY

AUTHOR OF "THE SCARLET PIMPERNEL," "THE NOBLE ROGUE," "PETTICOAT RULE"

HODDER & STOUGHTON
NEW YORK
GEORGE H. DORAN COMPANY

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CHAPTER I

A CURIOUS OLD BIRD

You cannot imagine what a tangle and muddle reigned in Uncle Jasper's museum! If you were not one of the privileged few, allowed to gaze wide-eyed on the countless treasures which positively littered every corner of the room — well, then, it would be no use to close your eyes and think what it must have looked like, because your wildest imaginings would fall far short of the reality.

I went into it once when I was a tiny mite, and Uncle Jasper was then very, very old; but the picture of that room as I saw it then impressed me more vividly than anything I have ever seen since then.

The room, you must know, was long and low, with a raftered ceiling, every beam of which was black with age and carved by hand. There were no two beams alike, for one had a garland of oak leaves festooned along it, another was decorated with trails of brier-rose, another with bunches of holly berries tied together with true-love knots, and so on, all most beautifully hand-carved and dating back to the time of Henry VII. Then on one side of the room there was a huge, deep, mullioned window with tiny panes of

greenish glass, through which you couldn't possibly see, all held together by lines of lead. The embrasure of the window was panelled with oak, quite as black as the beams of the ceiling, and these panels, too, were beautifully carved, in lovely patterns that represented folded linen, with every fold different, as you may imagine, for there was nothing conventional in any single portion or ornament of Uncle Jasper's museum.

Even the doors looked askew; though, of course, they were made of stout oak, and never creaked when you opened them. But their lines seemed to defy regularity and positively to sneer at plumb-lines.

There were two doors to the room, one which gave on the rest of the house — about which I must tell you later — and the other which was near the embrasured window and gave on a little stone porch.

Now, the best way to appreciate the view of Uncle Jasper's museum was not to enter it from the house, but rather from this same little stone porch which faced a square yard at the back of the house — a yard that might once have been a miniature farmyard, for it had barns all around it — great, big barns made coal black with tar and covered with heather thatch, on the top of which pigeons were always sitting, and beneath which I strongly suspect owls of holding their midnight palavers.

They were wonderful barns these, and put to many uses. One was fitted up roughly with boxes to accommodate two or three horses, if visitors came a-riding; another was used as a cowshed; a third held the small waggonette, wherein Uncle Jasper occasionally drove to Canterbury, eleven miles away; and a fourth held

just all the rubbish and all the lumber that you could possibly think of — bits of iron gate and all the old hayrakes and the chicken coops that weren't wanted, and the pea-sticks that were worth keeping, and pussy's latest family that had escaped the scullery bucket, and the herd of mice and rats that had evaded the vigilance of the cat, of the owls, and of the terrier.

And then, of course, there was the barn which belonged exclusively to the chickens, even though the chickens did not belong exclusively to it; for they were everywhere, and made their homes in every barn round the yard, and scratched up the flooring and the brick foundations, and roosted in the waggonette, and generally did as much mischief as a colony of self-respecting chickens can very well do.

Finally, there was the barn which adjoined the museum, and which held all the superfluous rubbish and lumber which no longer could find a place inside the house. This barn — it was really a loft — had no entrance from the yard, and it was raised some seven or eight feet from the ground on brick pillars. Its only ingress gave on the museum itself, and when you stood in that room looking towards the window and the yard, the door into this loft would be in the end wall on your right at some height from the floor, and a short flight of wooden stairs led up to it.

But, of course, you don't want to hear just now about the yard, or the barn, or the chickens; your concern, like mine, is of Uncle Jasper's museum, of which I desire to tell you.

Well, suppose that you — instead of knocking at the front door of Old Manor Farm, which, perhaps, would

have been more polite, even if more bold — had skirted the house, and were now standing in the yard, with the barns to your right and left and also behind you, you would be facing that same little stone porch of which I have already told you, and no doubt you would be wondering how the columns, being askew, contrived to uphold the quaint architrave.

The stone was of a delicate mellow colour, a grey made up of golds and greens, and in spring it was covered with the pale mauve of the wistaria and in the summer with the deep purple of the clematis, for these two climbers joined tendrils over the porch and never quarrelled, the wistaria always making way for the clematis when the time came, and the clematis keeping small and unobtrusive whilst the wistaria wanted plenty of room.

The door under the porch gave direct on the museum, and if you entered it this way you had a splendid view of the place. You saw the tall bookshelves opposite to you, with rows upon rows of books; you saw the wooden steps leading up to the loft on your left, and all round you saw cases on the walls filled with all kinds of eggs; you saw the table in the centre of the room, with Uncle Jasper's wig upon its stand, and the huge microscope, with its brass fittings shining like gold.

Then in the dark corners at either end you saw the skeleton of beasts such as you had never seen before, and antlers and horns of every shape and size. I could not, in fact, tell you what you did not see; there was a stuffed alligator, that hung by a chain from the ceiling, and stuffed lizards, that peered at you from

every point; and I could not even begin to tell you about the stuffed birds, for they were literally everywhere — on the tops of the bookcases and in cases on the wall, on the tables, the chairs, and the sofas. There were little birds and big birds, song birds and birds of prey, British birds and tropical birds, and birds from the ice regions, white birds, grey birds, red birds, and birds of every tone and colour.

And, believe me, that by far the most extraordinary bird in the whole museum sat in a tall-backed chair, covered in large-flowered tapestry, and had name Jasper Hemingford.

I suppose it was this constant handling of birds and being with birds that made Uncle Jasper look so like a bald-headed stork. For all day would he sit, with glue-pot and stuffing and I don't know what other implements, turning limp, dead birds into erect, defiant-looking ones, with staring eyes that were black in the centre and yellow round the rims, and could be bought by the thousand in a shop in London city.

Now, to get those birds into their proper position, so that the bird looked straight at you without the suspicion of a squint, required a great deal of skill and of precision, and Uncle Jasper would sit by the hour in his high-backed chair, bone-rimmed spectacles on nose, and his mouth screwed up as if he were perpetually whistling.

And that is the reason, no doubt, why his face was so like a bird's.

I told you that his wig always stood on a stand in the very centre of the big table, as if it were presiding over the assembly of glue-pots and balls of string, of

metal tools and boxes of eyes, and of eggs and dusty bottles that surrounded it like a crowd does a popular orator. And Uncle Jasper always wore a white cotton cap with a tassel to it, in order to protect his bald head against the draught. Aunt Caroline always knitted these caps for Uncle Jasper, as she did his white cotton stockings, and Susan washed them when they were dirty.

He invariably slipped off his coat the moment he entered the museum, and put it down somewhere amongst the litter, and never could find it again when he wanted it later on to go to dinner in. But his flowered dressing-gown was always laid ready for him on the back of his chair, so he found that easily enough, and put it on before settling down to work, and he would always forget to tie the cord and tassels round his waist, and they would trail after him when he moved about in the room, and Aunt Caroline's pet cat — if she happened to be in the museum — would pretend that one of the tassels was a mouse, and she would stalk it, and pounce upon it just when Uncle Jasper was about to mount his rickety library steps, and cause him to trip, and to break one of the panes of glass of his bookshelves, trying to save himself from falling.

But Uncle Jasper never swore when this happened. He only quoted Latin at the cat, and, as she didn't understand Latin, she went on in just the same perverse way as before.

Now Susan, the country wench, whom Aunt Caroline dignified by the name of "maid," did not know Latin any better than the cat, and I am quite sure that

in her own mind she thought that her master swore more often and more vigorously than was consistent with Christian piety.

On this same afternoon — the events of which crowded in so remarkably that that memorable day became the turning point in the career of several members of the Hemingford family — on this same afternoon, I say, which was on the 2nd of June, in the year 1835, Susan was sent to the museum by Mrs. Hemingford in order that she should tell the master that tea was served.

Susan, whose cap was always awry, and whose feet and hands appeared to have been made for somebody else, and clapped on to her arms and shins by mistake, invariably became very nervous and excited when she had to face the stuffed birds and beasts of the museum.

"For all the world like the internals," she would explain to her follower, Thomas Scrutch, the tea grocer's son from Birchington.

And this nervous excitement caused her to be still more clumsy than she usually was, her arms becoming like the wings of a windmill, her hands like flappers, and her feet like fire shovels, whilst her eyes, staring out of her round, red face, were very like those that lay in boxes on the centre table, and could be bought by the thousand in a shop in London city.

She did her best at first to attract Uncle Jasper's attention from the doorway. Of course, he had not heard her knock, nor was he conscious of her blue print dress and her cap, all awry, with its double row of starched frills.

He had got some awful-looking, grey, stark thing in

his hands, and his bone-rimmed spectacles were midway down his nose, and he was staring through them at the nasty-looking thing which he held, and muttering to himself all the while.

"He give me the jumps!" commented Susan inaudibly.

"Undoubtedly — undoubtedly," murmured Uncle Jasper, who was chuckling with delight, "a very fine specimen indeed of the Vespertilio ferrum equinum, or horseshoe bat."

"No wonder he be swearing at the horrible thing," thought Susan, whose nervousness was gaining more and more upon her. She was balancing herself first on one huge foot, then on the other, and saying in an awed whisper at intervals:

"An it please you, sir."

But, of course, Uncle Jasper took no notice of her. He just was delighted with the ugly, grey thing, and he cocked his head to one side and patted the thing with his long, bony fingers all the time.

"Length from the nose to the tip of the tail," he said meditatively, "three and a half inches to three and nine-sixteenths at the most."

"An it please you, sir," murmured poor Susan.

"Undoubtedly — undoubtedly!"— and a deep sigh of satisfaction came through the screwed-up lips of Uncle Jasper; "or, as one might more appropriately say, non est disputan . . ."

Now, wasn't it a pity that an elfin chance chose that very second in which to make poor, nervous Susan lose her equilibrium? She had danced about from one foot to another for some time, and during the process

her cap had slipped down over her left ear, the perspiration had fallen from her forehead to the tip of her nose, where it formed one ever-increasing drop, and she was shedding hairpins like a porcupine sheds his quills. Otherwise she had done no mischief.

But now when Latin once more fell from her master's lips she lurched forward, with arms outstretched; her hands, which certainly had been made for somebody much larger than herself, clutched at the nearest thing to support her falling person.

That nearest thing happened to be a chair, and on the chair were all kinds of funny things, including a number of pale blue eggs and a box of eyes; the chair slid on the oak floor, and Susan slid after the chair, until the chair and Susan encountered an obstacle and could slide no more; then both were turned over together, whilst eggs and eyes flew with amazing rapidity and in every possible direction along the shiny floor.

All that had occurred at the very moment that Uncle Jasper said the beginning of his last word of Latin, and when the clatter broke in on his meditations he paused before finishing his word, for the sudden noise had taken his breath away.

And when he recovered both his breath and his Latin it was to emit the last syllable of his interrupted phrase, and that was:

". . . dum!"

Can you wonder that Susan, who was sprawling on the floor like a starfish, had only just strength enough to gasp feebly:

"Yes, sir — please, sir!"

Then, of course, Uncle Jasper became aware of her presence. He looked at her over the rims of his spectacles, wondering, no doubt, why she had chosen this extraordinary method of entering his room.

"Lord bless my soul, Susan," he murmured in profound astonishment, "what are you doing there on the floor?"

"I am very sorry, sir — please, sir!" she stammered as she picked herself up and began to chase the fallen eggs and the rolling eyes.

"Go away," said Uncle Jasper mildly; "go away — never mind those things. Can't you see that I'm busy?"

"Yes, sir . . . but please, sir! . . ."

But already Uncle Jasper had forgotten the brief incident which had distracted him from the examination of his beloved specimen. He readjusted his spectacles, and once more turned his attention to the grey, flabby thing in his hand.

"The upright membrane at the end of the nose," he murmured, with every sigh of ecstatic delight visible in his glittering eyes and his twitching mouth, "perfect — perfect in shape, just like a horseshoe."

There is a courage that is born of despair and a boldness that comes of intense nervousness. Susan suddenly felt both, for she had had orders from her mistress not to return from her errand without bringing the master along with her, and there he was back again in the moon or somewheres paying no more heed to her than if she were a bit of dirt — and he never did mind dirt much.

So now she no longer muttered, she suddenly

shouted right at the top of her voice — shouted just like people shout when they are very frightened.

"The mistress sent me to tell you, sir —"

Uncle Jasper heard the voice, for he looked at her over the top of his spectacles; but he looked just as if he had never seen Susan before to-day.

"Lord bless my soul, Susan," he said mildly, "I didn't know you were here!"

"The mistress says, sir," said Susan, still shouting, for having got his attention she didn't want to lose it again, "will you please come to tea?"

"Eh?" queried Uncle Jasper in his funny, absent-minded way. "What?"

"Tea, sir," yelled Susan at the top of her voice. "It's getting cold, and Master Crabtree is eating all the muffins!"

"All right, all right, Susan!" said Uncle Jasper placidly. "You waste too many words, my girl! Dictum sapienti sat est. . . . A word to the wise is enough, Susan. And — what were you saying just now, my girl?" he asked absently.

"I was saying, sir —"

Uncle Jasper was staring at her in absolute blankness, whilst in his hand he held that ugly little thing, grey and flabby, with tiny claws pointing upwards and limp, pointed wings. Susan, too, stared at Uncle Jasper; he sat perfectly still, and his pale, watery eyes looked vacantly at her above his big spectacles.

"For all the world like one of his own mannies," thought Susan, whose sudden courage had already given way. The creepy feeling which always came over her when she was in the museum mastered her

now more strongly than ever. "I was that scared," she said later on, "my poor back just opened and shut when I saw that hugeous thing lying in his hand, for all the world like a begum."

At the time she just threw her apron over her face, and crying:

"The Lord preserve us!" she fled incontinently from the room.

Uncle Jasper gave a very deep sigh of satisfaction. He put down the precious specimen with infinite gentleness upon the table, then he rose from his chair and worked his way round the several pieces of furniture in the room toward the bookshelves against the wall. And all the while that he moved he muttered to himself in an absent-minded kind of way:

"Strange how much time is wasted by the uneducated in idle talk. Yet, fugit irreparabile tempus — time flies never to be recalled."

He took hold of the rickety little wooden steps and moved them to that position beside the bookshelves which he desired, then he began slowly to mount them. And all the while that he mounted his eyes travelled with the quickness of vast experience over the rows of books behind the glass doors.

Apparently the book that he required was on the very top of the bookcase, so Uncle Jasper mounted slowly and carefully until he had reached the top of the rickety wooden steps. There he now sat down, and, having opened one of the glass doors, he took out a ponderous volume bound in calf. He crossed one lean shank over the other so as to afford firm support for the book, then he opened it, and his bony fingers — so like the claws of

birds — wandered lovingly over the yellow-stained pages.

"Now, let me see!" he murmured, for he had a habit of talking to himself when he was engrossed in his work, "Vespertilio ferrum equinum. Vesper — vesper — ah, here we are!"

And having totally forgotten all about Susan and tea and his wife, he sat perched up there, very like a bald-headed old stork. His long, thin nose was bent over his book, his lean shanks were encased in white cotton stockings, and the tassels of his dressing-gown beat an uneven tattoo against the wood of the rickety library steps.

CHAPTER II

A KIND OLD SOUL

One of the many fallacies invented by learned people with a view to confusing the unlearned is the saying that " Nature never makes a mistake."

Now no one on earth makes more mistakes than Dame Nature makes up aloft, or wherever else she may dwell. And I will tell you one of the greatest mistakes that she ever did make, and that was that she put a true mother's heart inside the ample chest of Aunt Caroline and then wholly omitted — or forgot — to give her children of her own to love, to cosset, and to worry out of all patience.

Aunt Caroline as a mother would have been splendid. Her children's faces would have been a bright red, and would have shone like apples that have been polished against the sleeve of a well-worn smock; their hair would have been smooth and glossy, their hands white and adorned with well-trimmed nails; they would have been learned in the art of making every kind of wine and preserve and pickle that mind of woman can conceive and stomach of man can digest, and totally ignorant of everything else in the world.

As an aunt, Aunt Caroline was a failure. For from the moment that her sister's children were placed in her charge by their dying mother they did exactly as they

liked at Old Manor Farm, and twiddled Aunt Caroline right round their thumbs.

To be sure Olive, the eldest, had snow-white hands with beautifully shaped nails to them; but she did not employ them in making cowslip wine and rhubarb preserve: she employed them chiefly for the decking up and the ornamentation of the rest of her lovely person, and one of them she employed now in the wearing of the golden ring which Sir Baldwin Jeffreys had placed on it some three or four years ago.

Olive, from the time that she left off playing with dolls — and that was very early in the history of her short life — had made up her mind that she would not wear out her youth and her beauty at the Old Manor Farm in the company of Uncle Jasper's stuffed abominations: and since Aunt Caroline could not afford to take her up to London, where she might have made a suitable match, she looked about her in Thanet itself, in search of the most likely gentleman of wealth and position who would prove willing and eager to ask her to quit the lonely farmhouse, and to grace London society in his company and his own house as his mistress.

The most likely gentleman turned out to be Sir Baldwin Jeffreys, who had a large estate near Ashford and a fine house in town. He had come down to the neighbourhood of Minster-in-Thanet for some fishing with his friend, Mr. Culpepper, and Mr. Culpepper — to while away a fine Sunday afternoon — had driven him over to have tea with Mr. and Mrs. Hemingford at Old Manor Farm, and to see old Jasper Hemingford's museum, which was the pride and talk of Thanet.

Sir Baldwin Jeffreys sat in the oak-rafted parlour of Old Manor Farm, and Miss Olive Aldmarshe handed him a cup of tea. Sir Baldwin Jeffreys was five-and-forty years old, but he looked thirty-five, and on that afternoon he felt twenty-two.

That was more than three years ago now, and in the meanwhile Lady Jeffreys had been the bright comet of two London seasons, and Old Manor Farm and its inhabitants had not seen her since the day when she walked out of it, a radiant and beautiful bride, on the arm of her middle-aged husband, and entered the smart coach, with its white and scarlet liveries and heavy Flemish horses, which were to convey her to her new home.

And now she had arrived quite unexpectedly on this very morning, and at the moment when Aunt Caroline was about to carve Cousin Barnaby's third helping of lamb. There had come the noise of a distant coach rattling down the hill, the clatter of horses, the jingling of harness, the shouts of the postilions. Aunt Caroline had just time to ejaculate: "I wonder now who that might be!" and Barnaby Crabtree to grunt in response: "Nobody for us, I hope!" when the handsome coach was seen to swing in through the narrow gates, and — with a great deal more clatter and a vast amount more jingling — to come to a halt before the front door.

"Lord bless us all, it must be Olive!" exclaimed Aunt Caroline, as she quickly put down the pair of carvers and started fiddling nervously with the strings of her apron.

"That is no excuse, Caroline," remarked Barnaby

Crabtree acidly, " for not handing me over a further portion of lamb as I desired."

" No, Barnaby," said Aunt Caroline meekly.

And it was because she was then obliged to resume her work of carving and to help Cousin Barnaby with two slices of lamb, a roast potato, a spoonful of peas, and a sprinkling of mint sauce, that she was not standing at the front door to receive Sir Baldwin and his lady when the latter descended from her coach.

Indeed it was Olive who had arrived so unexpectedly. She had come in her coach, together with numerous boxes, and Sir Baldwin had ridden beside the coach all the way from Ashford.

Soon Olive was standing in the hall, meekly submitting to Aunt Caroline's embrace, whilst Uncle Jasper fussed round them both like an old hen, and Susan stood in the doorway wide-eyed and open-mouthed, gaping at the beautiful lady with the shot silk cloak and the five huge feathers in her bonnet, until Aunt Caroline roused her from this state of semi-imbecility by giving her arm a vigorous pinch and ordering her back into her kitchen to put a couple more plates in the Dutch oven.

In the meanwhile Sir Baldwin Jeffreys, having greeted Aunt Caroline and Uncle Jasper with all the courtly grace peculiar to gentlemen who live much in London, gave directions to his servants and postilions to stable his saddle-horse in Mr. Hemingford's stables, but to return to Ashford with the coach forthwith, since her ladyship would make a stay here for a few days. He himself would return home that selfsame evening.

Aunt Caroline's notions of hospitality, however, would not allow her to let Sir Baldwin's servants depart without at least a good cut off that leg of lamb when it presently found its way into the kitchen. So for at least an hour after that coachman and postilions in white and scarlet graced the huge stone-walled kitchen with their presence, and made Susan's eyes grow larger and larger with the tales they told her of the magnificent society in London of which their master and mistress were the most fêted leaders.

All this had occurred earlier in the day, of course, for twelve o'clock was the dinner hour at Old Manor Farm, and since then everyone had had a brief hour's rest. Uncle Jasper had retired to his museum, where he quickly forgot that he had a niece and that she had arrived that day. Aunt Caroline had vainly tried to keep awake whilst Sir Baldwin Jeffreys talked politely on agricultural subjects; she nodded over Jersey cows, and closed her eyes over late lambs, but when the harvest of sainfoin came on the *tapis* she frankly lay back in her chair and began to snore.

Olive in the meanwhile had found her way to the room which she used to occupy when she was a girl. It seemed mightily small and uncomfortable after the luxuries of her house in St. James's-street, or of her home near Ashford. Aunt Caroline, who had come up with her, found herself vaguely apologising for these discomforts, even though Olive had occupied that selfsame room for fifteen years of her life.

"Try and rest now, Olive dear," she said, as she prepared to rejoin Sir Baldwin in the little front parlour,

" the child will be home by the time you come down again."

" Ah, yes!" said Olive languidly, smothering a yawn. " By the way, where is the child? "

" On some bird's-nesting expedition," replied Aunt Caroline, with a sigh; " she is still the tomboy you used to scold. I haven't seen her since breakfast time, but she'll surely be home to tea."

Two hours later the little party was gathered around the tea-table. Aunt Caroline's best silver teapot had come out of its green baize bag for the occasion and resplended above the china cups and saucers and the plates full of bread and butter and home-made cakes. Olive, languid and bored, was sipping her tea. Sir Baldwin, looking black as thunder, was busy whacking his boot with his riding-crop, and Cousin Barnaby Crabtree sat in the most comfortable armchair, with the dish of muffins close to his hand, and his third cup of tea nearly empty.

Susan had been sent to fetch the master, but had not yet returned.

" I declare," said Aunt Caroline as she put down the heavy silver teapot and rose from her chair —" I declare that that girl is nothing short of an imbecile. I sent her to fetch your uncle," she added, not specially addressing Olive, but because she always referred to her husband as " your uncle " whoever she might be talking to at the time —" I sent her to fetch your uncle, and now I hear her moving about in the scullery, and he'll already have forgotten all about having been sent for, and all about his tea."

" Even if he comes now," said Barnaby Crabtree

placidly, "the tea will have drawn too much, and there are no more muffins left. Leave him alone, Caroline," he added more sternly; "he'll come when he wants to, and in the meanwhile cut me a piece of plum cake."

However, Aunt Caroline did not like the idea of Uncle Jasper going without his tea, so, having cut the desired piece of plum cake, she begged to be excused, and made her way straight to the museum.

There she found Uncle Jasper sitting at the top of his library steps deeply absorbed in a book.

Aunt Caroline could have smacked him, so angry did she feel.

"There you go again, Jasper," she cried; "there you go, up in the clouds, and no more heeding your own lawful wife than a bunch of woody carrots. Jasper," she added, seeing that indeed he took but scant notice of her, "Jasper, I say!"

And she rapped with her bunch of keys upon the back of the nearest chair.

"Eh? What?" asked Uncle Jasper meekly.

"You've scared that silly minx Susan out of her wits, and now your tea is getting cold, and Sir Baldwin will be going directly."

"Sir Baldwin?" queried Uncle Jasper vacantly as he stared down at her like an old crow from its perch.

He had wholly forgotten who Sir Baldwin might be, and vaguely wondered what this gentleman's going and coming had to do with the Vespertilio ferrum equinum, a specimen of which — so rare in the British Islands — was even now lying upon his own table.

"Jasper," ejaculated Aunt Caroline, who you must

own had grave cause for vexation, "Jasper, you don't mean to tell me that you had forgotten that Sir Baldwin Jeffreys said at dinner-time that he must leave us directly after tea!"

"No, no, my dear," replied Uncle Jasper vaguely; "indeed I had not forgotten that circumstance, and I am truly sorry that Sir Baldwin is going so soon."

"A very kind word, my good Hemingford," came in pleasing accents from Sir Baldwin Jeffreys, who had followed in Aunt Caroline's footsteps and was even now standing at the door of the museum. "May I enter?" he added courteously.

"Of course, of course," said Aunt Caroline. "Do enter, Sir Baldwin. Jasper was asking after you."

When he was not scowling, as he had done ever since his arrival, Sir Baldwin could be exceedingly pleasant in his manner. He came into the room now, and at Aunt Caroline's invitation sat on one of the chairs that did not happen to be littered with eggs and stuffed lizards.

"A very kind word indeed," he said, "and 'tis pleasant for the parting guest when 'so soon' waits upon 'farewell.'"

"Must you really go to-day, Sir Baldwin?" said Aunt Caroline.

"Alas! madam," replied Sir Baldwin, and he sighed with becoming regret, "urgent business recalls me to London to-morrow, and I must sleep at Ashford to-night."

"'Tis a short visit you have paid us," she remarked.

"I only escorted my wife down from home — and now," he said, while with old-fashioned gallantry he

raised Aunt Caroline's mittened hand to his lips, "I leave her in the safest and kindest of hands."

"With a membrane at the end of the nose."

This from Uncle Jasper, who, absent-minded as usual, was reading aloud to himself out of his book. Sir Baldwin looked startled, as well he might, seeing that Uncle Jasper had but a moment ago appeared to be taking part in the conversation; but Aunt Caroline remarked indignantly:

"Jasper, how can you say such a thing? I am sure Olive always had a beautiful nose!"

Whereupon Sir Baldwin laughed immoderately, and for the first time to-day cast off the gloom which had been weighing over his spirits.

"Nay!" Aunt Caroline went on quite placidly, for she did not perceive that anything funny had been said; but she was too polite to resent Sir Baldwin's levity. "We are happy, of course, to have our Olive back with us for awhile. 'Tis sorely we missed her when you took her away from us."

Then she sighed with every appearance of deep sorrow, though to be sure no one had desired a marriage for Olive more earnestly than had Aunt Caroline. But the good soul had always a remarkable store of regrets laid down somewhere in the bottom of her soul, and whenever occasion demanded she would deck out one of these regrets and trot it out for the benefit of the beholder; and the regret came out well accompanied by sighs and decked out to look very real, though in reality it only existed in Aunt Caroline's imagination.

Having duly sighed over Olive's most longed-for

departure from Old Manor Farm, she now produced yet another fond regret.

"How I wish," she said, "that her sister were more like her!"

"Is the child as much a tomboy, then, as ever?" asked Sir Baldwin kindly.

"Worse, my dear Sir Baldwin," sighed Aunt Caroline—"worse! Now look at her to-day. Off she goes directly after breakfast — and only one piece of bacon did she have, though I fried a bit of the streaky, of which she is very fond. She'd be hungry — wouldn't you think so, now? But no! Off she goes, Heaven only knows where — all alone — without asking her aunt's permission or excusing herself for not appearing at dinner. Not in for tea, either. You saw me putting a muffin down for her by the hob. No! No dinner, no tea — and now it's nearly four o'clock, and the child not home yet, and your uncle and I not knowing whether she has broken her neck climbing a tree or torn her stockings going through the scrub. And it isn't that I don't do my best with her; but, there, she'll never be like Olive, though I do give her brimstone and peppermint once a week for her complexion! Such a name, too! Boadicea! Whatever can her poor mother have been thinking about!"

"An unusual elongation of the tail," came solemnly from the top of the library steps.

And at this Sir Baldwin was seized with such an uncontrollable fit of laughter that his eyes were streaming and he was forced to hold his sides, for they ached furiously. What made him laugh more than anything was that Aunt Caroline was apparently under

the impression that Uncle Jasper was taking part willingly in the conversation, and that his remark was a comment upon what she had said. For even now when Uncle Jasper made the funny statement about the elongation of the tail she retorted quite angrily:

"She was not, Jasper! I am sure my dear sister never thought of such things."

At which Sir Baldwin, fearing that he would break his sides, went quickly out of the room.

CHAPTER III

A PROVOKING YOUNG WIFE

Lady Jeffreys met her husband in the square oak-panelled hall, which gave directly on every portion of the old house. She was coming out of the little parlour on the left, having duly finished tea.

"Ah, Sir Baldwin," she said in that affected, mincing way which had grown on her in the past two years, "your groom has just been round from the stables! He wanted to know at what hour you wish to start, since you must return to Ashford to-night."

In a moment all Sir Baldwin's good humour had vanished. He frowned, and his handsome face wore an air of deep wrath and also of gloom, and anyone could see that to speak politely and quietly now cost him no little effort. It required no great power of observation to see that a matrimonial storm was effectually brewing — nay, it even seemed as if the storm had already broken out previously, and that the halt at Old Manor Farm had been but a momentary lull between two vigorous claps of thunder.

Olive stood in the hall, looking remarkably pert and pretty. She was beautifully dressed in a gown of emerald-green silk, with trimmings of black braid and quaint buttons. She had a very slim waist, and the elongated shape of her bodice and full gathers in the skirt set off her trim figure to great advantage.

She had taken off her bonnet, and her fair hair now showed all round her head in a maze of innumerable curls and puffs, which were richly set off by a high comb of pierced tortoiseshell. No doubt she was excessively pretty, and so dainty, too, from the tip of her dainty leather shoe and her fine white silk stockings to the cluster of curls that fell each side of her small oval face from the temple to the cheek, and anyone who was not observant would naturally marvel how any husband could scowl on such a picture.

She looked very provocative just now, with her head cocked on one side like a pert robin, one hand on her hip, and the other swinging an embroidered reticule by its long delicate chain.

Sir Baldwin looked on her, and the scowl darkened yet more deeply on his face. But he made no comment in reply to what she had said, until Aunt Caroline's entrance into the hall recalled him to himself; then he asked calmly:

"And what answer did your ladyship give to my groom?"

"That you would start within half an hour," she replied flippantly.

"Nay, Olive," said Aunt Caroline from under the lintel of the museum door; "perhaps Sir Baldwin may be persuaded to tarry with us until to-morrow at the least."

"That were presumptuous on my part, Madam," said Sir Baldwin, "since my wife seems so mightily eager to rid herself of me."

Olive laughed lightly, but I must say that her

laughter sounded a little forced and devoid of true mirth.

"Faith!" she said, "with your temper at boiling point, you have not been an agreeable companion."

"I intruded as little as I could on your ladyship's privacy," he retorted.

"I could have come down here alone," she said. "The coachman surely knows the way between Ashford and Birchington. I had a postilion — your presence was unnecessary, and 'twas you forced your escort on me, remember!"

"My dear Olive!" exclaimed Aunt Caroline, who was genuinely shocked.

Sir Baldwin's face had become very pale, but evidently he was too polite to allow his temper to get the better of him in the presence of his hostess. But this was not to say that he would permit his wife to aim her unpleasant shafts at him without meting her some measure of punishment.

"As your conduct with a young jackanapes has lately made your ladyship the talk of the town," he said coldly, "I preferred that you should not travel alone."

"Lest my departure be construed into an elopement," she retorted, with a show of spite, "perhaps with Lieutenant Carrington on board the *Dolphin* — or is it someone else just now? Faith, your insane jealousy makes *you* the talk of the town!"

"Olive, I pray you," interposed Aunt Caroline, who was becoming alarmed both at Olive's spiteful vehemence and Sir Baldwin's unnatural calm, "remember he is your husband!"

"Great Heavens, Aunt," cried Olive at the top of her high-pitched voice, "would that I could forget it sometimes!"

"It would be an evil day for your ladyship if you were to do so!" said Sir Baldwin, who at Olive's last words had flushed to the roots of his hair, and now had much ado to keep his rage under control.

He looked so wrathful just then, and his eyes shot so much anger upon his wife, that instinctively the flippancy of her manner died down. Her oval cheeks became quite white, and, though she strove to laugh again, it was obvious that she stood somewhat in awe of her husband's present mood. But, like all women who find pleasure in worrying and teasing a man, she would not let him see for a moment that she was frightened. Therefore she laughed and pouted and shrugged her dainty round shoulders — did many things, in fact, to hide the quivering of her lips and the trembling of her hands.

"Oh, ho, ho, ho!" she exclaimed a little shrilly. "Faith, but this is interesting! And you, Sir Baldwin, grow more and more charming every day! Violence and abuse have I suffered in plenty. It is threats this time, eh?"

"I never threaten," said Sir Baldwin quietly, "as your ladyship is well aware — save when I am prepared to act —"

"The part of a coward?" she interposed quickly.

Aunt Caroline threw up her hands in horror. Never in all her life had she heard a wife thus addressing her husband. She herself had oft cause to be firm

with Jasper, but never — oh, never! — would she dream of being anything but polite to him.

"No," Sir Baldwin said quietly; "rather the part of a judge, and if necessary that of an —"

"Sir Baldwin!" shrieked Aunt Caroline, terrified.

Olive, too, was very frightened now. No doubt she knew her husband well, and knew how much determination and vindictiveness lay behind his calm and gentleman-like manner. She had teased him often enough before — teased him until he lost all control over himself, and had perforce to fly out of her room lest his temper should induce him to do her some injury. But to-day she had evidently provoked him further than a mere outburst of rage, and the fact that he did keep his rage so completely under control proved to her that deeper determination lay in him now than had ever been there before.

But, womanlike, she would not even now let him see that she was afraid of him: what she did not mind his seeing was that she hated him, and this she tried to convey to him by a look. She drew up her graceful figure and tossed her head defiantly, and you should have seen her eyes then — narrowed until they were mere slits, whilst a row of tiny white teeth buried themselves in her lower lip.

"I hate you!"

She did not say it, but she looked it. Every line in her face spoke of it and every movement of her body proclaimed the fact, and Sir Baldwin Jeffreys, being no fool, could read those lines plainly enough even as she sailed past him straight up the stairs on her way to her room.

Sir Baldwin as soon as she was out of sight seemed to recover his normal balance. The scowl was still there on his face, and dark thoughts must indeed have been chasing one another behind that frowning brow of his. But good breeding prevented his showing more of his feelings now, and, moreover, he really was very fond of his wife, and put all her coquetries down to youth and inexperience. As a rule, when she provoked him beyond endurance he found that an hour or two away from her presence restored his equanimity and reinflamed his ardour and admiration for her beauty.

And she really could be very engaging when she chose. Sir Baldwin still cherished in his heart many happy recollections of her affection for him, and of her pretty show of gratitude, whenever — after a matrimonial tiff — he strove to console her by the present of a handsome ring or some other article of jewellery which she had previously coveted. Until recently she had shown him quite a good deal of deference, never flouting him in public, as many fashionable women were wont to do to their husbands; and he firmly believed that all her flirtations — and these were many — had been absolutely innocent, and merely the result of childlike belief in her own charms.

But Sir Baldwin was a very proud man, and fully conscious of his eighty-and-forty years and of the ridicule which is wont to assail a middle-aged husband when the wife happens to be young and pretty. During the last London season gossip had been over-busy with Lady Jeffreys, and this he did not like. In his

own estimation, the wife of Sir Baldwin Jeffreys should be beyond suspicion, and for the past few months now he had oft heard veiled insinuating talk aimed against his wife.

The name of a certain Lieutenant Carrington, of *H.M.S. Dolphin,* had been coupled with that of Lady Jeffreys. The young man was well-looking and of approved family connections. He had greatly distinguished himself recently in the China seas, and on his return home had been much *fêted* in London society. Sir Baldwin knew him to be an upright and honourable fellow incapable of vulgar intrigue, but Lady Jeffreys had smiled on Lieutenant Carrington in a manner calculated to turn the head of any unsophisticated young man fresh from the China seas. Whereupon heads began to nod and tongues to wag.

Sir Baldwin was very angry, and all through the early part of the London season there were many hot and bitter quarrels between himself and his lady. Now the season was still at its height, and Lady Jeffreys's reputation had become a rag in the hands of her friends. Sir Baldwin was very wrathful, and suddenly took it upon himself to announce to his wife that she must forthwith prepare to quit London, for he had decided that she should spend the rest of the summer at their country house near Ashford.

He had expected protestations, tears, even angry refusal, at this preposterous notion of quitting London the second week in June, when the season was at its height and the invitations for Lady Sydney's ball and the Duchess of Kent's reception were just out. To his astonishment, Lady Jeffreys received the dictum in

perfect meekness, with downcast eyes and lips slightly twitching, but otherwise in absolute submission to her husband's will. All she stipulated as a reward for passive obedience — and this, too, came as a humble request — was that she should spend the beautiful month of June in her old home in Thanet. It would ease the sadness of her heart, she said, and raised a lace pocket handkerchief to her eyes.

Sir Baldwin Jeffreys promptly chided himself for being a brute and a bully, and — given the slightest encouragement — he would then and there have made amends for his harshness by changing his intentions and allowing his pretty, submissive wife to remain in London for as long as she pleased. But, strangely enough, Lady Jeffreys discouraged all attempts at reconciliation, and, with what seemed to him wilful obstinacy, persisted now in her desire to spend a few weeks with her uncle and aunt at Old Manor Farm.

Whilst Sir Baldwin completed his arrangements with regard to the care of his London house whilst her ladyship would be away, Olive remained perfectly charming, even-tempered and gentle. During three days Sir Baldwin Jeffreys felt himself once more a happy man. Every cloud on the horizon of his matrimonial heaven seemed to have been dissipated as if by magic, and he realised that in this simple-hearted country girl he had absolutely found an ideal mate, and that it was his harshness and jealous temper alone that had warped her exquisite disposition.

On the fourth day, when every preparation was complete and the caretaker and his family were duly installed in the house in St. James's-street, Lady Jef-

freys suddenly changed her tune. Meekness, submission, and gentleness seemed to have vanished with her boxes, which had been sent on by the luggage chaise. Once more she became the capricious, exacting woman who in the past three years had well-nigh broken Sir Baldwin Jeffreys's heart and certainly soured his disposition. She told him very plainly what her feelings were towards him, and these certainly were anything but kindly; she derided him for his jealousy, upbraided him for his harshness, scorned him for his approaching middle age, and finally called him a fool for having been so easily gulled into the belief that she would ever become the submissive slave of an abominable tyrant.

She posed as a martyr to his brutality, and finally entered her coach with wrath expressed in every line of her figure and triumph blazing — unseen by him — in her eyes.

Thus they travelled to Ashford — she alone in the coach, he riding silently by its side. Thus they spent one night in their beautiful country house without exchanging one single word of friendship. She closed her door on him and refused to respond to every overture of peace, until his remorse changed once more to wrath, and he brought her silently to Old Manor Farm, nursing his wrongs and vaguely thinking of revenge.

CHAPTER IV

A MEDDLESOME OLD BUSYBODY

It was a whole hour since tea-time, and Boadicea had not yet returned from her birds'-nesting expedition. Sir Baldwin Jeffreys would have liked to have seen her ere he left Old Manor Farm, because he was very fond of the child and was really sorry for her, though in a measure she had a very happy home, for Aunt Caroline, despite her habit of perpetual scolding, was a warm-hearted, kind, and generous woman; nevertheless, the girl's life must of necessity be a very lonely one. There were but few neighbours round Old Manor Farm, and practically no young people of Boadicea's age to consort with her, and since the marriage of her sister there was no doubt that she must have led a very isolated life.

It was therefore with deep regret that Sir Baldwin found himself forced to start his return journey without having embraced little Boadicea, but the hour was getting late if he desired to reach Ashford before evening. He had dispatched the coach homewards earlier in the day, and now he asked that his horse might be brought round forthwith.

To Aunt Caroline's hospitable entreaties that he should stay at least until the morrow he opposed a steady refusal. The brief scene which he had just

had with his wife had told him plainly how wide for the moment was the matrimonial breach, and that nothing but absence could tighten the bonds of affection which were threatening to snap.

Old Manor Farm, though commodious and soundly built, was none too roomy. If Sir Baldwin now elected to stay, he would perforce be thrown greatly in his wife's company — not to say intimacy — and he believed that in her present highly irritable mood and his own sense of wrong both he and she might be tempted to say things which would render the breach irreparable.

Olive had retired to her room after the violent passage of arms in the hall. Sir Baldwin could entertain no hope that she would come down again before his departure in order to bid him farewell.

But Aunt Caroline fussed round him, garrulous and kindly as usual, offering him various kinds of refreshment, despite the fact that he had not yet had time to digest his tea, and incidentally inventing a hundred apologies for Olive's conduct, which in her own heart she felt had been very blameworthy indeed.

Just when Sir Baldwin was leaving, his horse being at the door with Topcoat — the outdoor man — at his head, Barnaby Crabtree came up those few steps which lead from the hall to the dining-room and kitchen of Old Manor Farm. He had spent the last half-hour in polishing off the muffins and tea which had been set aside on the hob for Boadicea when she returned.

Barnaby Crabtree was very dyspeptic, which ailment made his complexion muddy and the whites of his eyes yellow, but it did not make him thin. He

was a huge, fat man, with a big bald head, round the base of which sparse hair of a faded sandy colour made an uneven fringe from ear to ear.

He had very few teeth in his mouth, which caused his jaw to look loose and flabby, and the colour of his eyes was of a nondescript yellowish grey. He was invariably dressed in loose, ill-fitting clothes, with long trousers that reached midway down his shins, disclosing four inches of pink and white striped cotton socks, and half the day he went about with carpet slippers on his feet and with a napkin tied round his neck like a bib.

Sir Baldwin, who had not previous to this day been acquainted with him, thought him the most extraordinary-looking man he had ever seen. During dinner, however, Aunt Caroline had so monopolised his attention that he had not paid much heed to Mr. Crabtree, who, on the other hand, was far too deeply engrossed in the business of eating and drinking to bestow any attention on Sir Baldwin.

Thus, meeting in the hall, and with Sir Baldwin just on the point of departure, even Barnaby Crabtree — ill-mannered though he was — could not help but pause a moment in order to bid him farewell.

"You are wise," he said blandly, "to make an early start; horse exercise is exceedingly unwholesome after a heavy meal."

"Oh, as to that," remarked Sir Baldwin, "I would gladly have ridden after supper had the distance been less great or the moon at its full! As it is, and with so much thunder in the air, I must make for Ashford before nightfall."

"And you are not taking your wife away with you?"

"Certainly not!" interposed Aunt Caroline. "Sir Baldwin, I am happy to say, has brought our dear Olive down here for a lengthy stay."

"Ah!" said Cousin Barnaby; "I am sorry to hear that."

"Sorry!" ejaculated Aunt Caroline in great indignation. "Well, really, Cousin Barnaby! . . ."

And, despite his sorrowful mood, Sir Baldwin himself could not help but smile at the man's impudence.

"Females in a household are a greatly disturbing element, Caroline," rejoined Mr. Crabtree, quite unperturbed, "and it is a strange and regrettable fact that, though I came here solely for peace — for this place is otherwise neither amusing nor exhilarating — I have been troubled on one and the same day with the two things I have always tried to avoid."

"And what may these two things be, sir?" asked Sir Baldwin politely.

"Females and sailors," said Mr. Crabtree curtly.

"Sailors?"

"Aye! Females and sailors, sir, are equally objectionable, and, like headache and biliousness, you seldom get one without the other."

"Sailors?" reiterated Sir Baldwin, who, indeed, now seemed gravely disturbed. The frown on his brow had deepened, and his eyes travelled restlessly and as if suspiciously from one face to the other.

"Will you kindly explain, sir?" he said courteously, trying his best to appear calm.

With her usual garrulousness Aunt Caroline quickly interposed.

"Nay, nay, Sir Baldwin," said she; "I pray you take no heed of Cousin Barnaby. . . . His bark, as the saying is, is more vicious than his bite . . ."

"Oh, is it?" muttered Cousin Barnaby.

"He is as pleased as we all are that our dear Olive will stay with us for awhile."

"Oh, am I?"

"But he has been a little upset since yesterday, when *H.M.S. Dolphin* put into Ramsgate Harbour."

"The *Dolphin!*" exclaimed Sir Baldwin, and for the first time to-day his good manners deserted him, and he swore a very ugly oath, which greatly distressed Aunt Caroline, for she could not understand its cause, though she did know that fashionable gentlemen in London had a way of swearing at all times, in and out of season. She supposed that as he was gesticulating somewhat vigorously with his riding-crop he must have struck his ankle with it; and everybody knows how painful such a blow can be.

However, she thought it would be more polite to pretend not to have heard the vigorous expletive at all, so she rejoined quite placidly:

"Yes, the *Dolphin.* Some of her officers are lodging in the town; they came ashore yesterday."

"And demoralised the entire female population of Thanet," concluded Mr. Crabtree acidly.

"As for me," said she, "I am pining to see the son of my old friend Mamie Carrington."

This time Sir Baldwin did not swear, but had Aunt Caroline not been so absorbed in her own conversa-

tion she would have been startled by the expression on his face. His eyes nearly disappeared under the frown, and his lips were set so tightly that they formed just one narrow dark streak above his chin.

"You must remember Mamie Carrington, Sir Baldwin," continued Aunt Caroline volubly. "She was Mary Janet Calverston, you know — such a pretty girl — and she made a splendid match. Squire Carrington is the richest man in Lincolnshire, so they say, and they have an only son, Jack, who is a lieutenant on the *Dolphin* now. When last I saw him he was a baby in long clothes, and — But what is the matter, Sir Baldwin?" she said, the tone of her voice suddenly changing, for she had caught sight of the wrathful expression in his face. "You seem upset."

"Oh, it's nothing, nothing!" he said, trying to master himself and to speak quietly. "I — I must speak with my wife."

He made a movement as if desiring to go upstairs to his wife's room, and Aunt Caroline intercepted him, saying hurriedly:

"Let me go and tell her, and do you sit down awhile, Sir Baldwin. I declare, you seem to be trembling all over. I'll go and tell Olive."

But now it was he who detained her, placing his hand on her arm.

"I thank you," he said. "That is — I pray you do not go. I'll not disturb her now — not just at this moment. I —"

He paused a moment, and then resumed quite calmly:

"Dear Mrs. Hemingford, you have been so kind,

and your kindness renders me presumptuous. I think that, in effect, the heat has been rather too much for me. I was in the saddle some hours under the glare of the midday sun. I think, if you would allow me, I would like to change my mind and stay until I can get home in the cool of the evening."

"Change your mind, Sir Baldwin, by all means!" exclaimed Aunt Caroline, who was highly delighted, and in the simplicity of her heart never thought of connecting Sir Baldwin's caprice with his curious behaviour of a moment ago. "Glad indeed am I to have the pleasure of your company a little longer!"

"Positively idiotic!" was Cousin Barnaby's muttered comment.

"Won't you," she added, "change your mind yet further and stay the night?"

"No, no!" said he more cheerily. "Thank you a thousand times! And, if I may, I will just tell your man to put up my horse again until after supper. What time will that be, dear Mrs. Hemingford?"

"Half-past six, Sir Baldwin, if quite convenient to you."

"Then, if you will allow me, I will order my horse for half-past seven o'clock. It will be a beautiful bright night, and I can reach Ashford, even with a good long rest at Canterbury, well before midnight."

He seemed to have quite regained his composure, and Aunt Caroline — than whom there was not a less observant person — never noticed that the angry flush still lingered in his cheeks and that the frown had, if anything, deepened on his brow.

Barnaby Crabtree, much disappointed that at least

one of the unwelcome visitors would not be going just yet, had unceremoniously walked upstairs in the direction of his room.

Sir Baldwin Jeffreys went to the door and gave Topcoat half a sovereign, telling him to bring the horse round again at half-past seven. He had a burning desire in his heart to speak yet once more with his wife. He wanted to assure himself that her submission when leaving London had not been a clever mask to hide her duplicity and her wilfulness. He could not imagine that she had prearranged this journey to Thanet with a view to meeting young Carrington clandestinely.

In his heart of hearts he believed her to be incapable of such a vulgar intrigue, but he wished to speak with her, just once again, in order to make sure.

At the same time, he did not wish to meet her now in the first flush of his anger and whilst jealous suspicions were tearing at his heart, and might cause him to say things which he afterwards would regret. His friend, Mr. Culpepper, was for the moment in residence at the Abbey, distant just over two miles from Old Manor Farm. Sir Baldwin in his mind decided that the best thing he could do would be to walk down and visit his friend, and then to return in about two hours' time, sobered from his anger and his temper quite cool.

He expressed his wish to Aunt Caroline, who, feeling reassured as to his health, gave him directions how to take short cuts through certain fields the sooner to reach the Abbey.

Then she nodded pleasantly to him from the doorstep, assured him that she would in the meanwhile explain to Olive that he had decided to tarry until the

cool hours of the evening, and finally, when he walked away in the direction of Minster, she waved him a last adieu, and then carefully closed the front door.

After which she went in search of her darning basket.

CHAPTER V

A CAPRICIOUS TYRANT

It still wanted an hour or two before supper-time, and still Boadicea was from home.

Aunt Caroline, feeling a little anxious, but not allowing herself to appear so, or her anxiety to interfere with the usual arrangements of the day, had gone — as was her wont — to worry Uncle Jasper in his study.

She always did this between tea-time and supper, because, supper being a cold meal at Old Manor Farm, she always got it ready earlier in the day, and had therefore plenty of leisure between the hours of four o'clock and 6:30. Having nothing more important to do at that hour, she invariably took her darning basket up to the museum, and sat there darning socks and plaguing Uncle Jasper with countless interruptions, just when he was most deeply immersed in his books.

She worried him with every subject she could possibly think of: Susan's misdeeds and Boadicea's education, and lately it had been Cousin Barnaby's selfishness and greed.

We must, however, do Aunt Caroline the justice to say that she did not greatly upset Uncle Jasper. Her talk was so garrulous and so constant that after the first few minutes he paid no more heed to it; he could go on reading perched upon his library steps whilst her voice went droning on from below.

"You, Jasper, have got to put your foot down!"

She had made this remark once or twice before this afternoon whilst she sat darning Cousin Barnaby's pink and white striped socks; but Uncle Jasper, still absorbed in his reading, did not look up from his book. She took up her large cutting-out scissors and banged the metal gluepot persistently with it, until Uncle Jasper was bound to notice her.

"Yes, yes, my dear," he said gently. "What is it?"

"You must put your foot down!" she reiterated very slowly, accentuating every syllable as she spoke. And Uncle Jasper, who always perched cross-legged on the library steps, quickly uncrossed his legs and put his right foot meekly down beside the left.

In doing so he lost his balance, and his book slid off his thin knees right down on to the floor with a great clatter and the raising of a cloud of dust.

Uncle Jasper quietly came down the steps, picked up his book, and once more mounted up to his perch, whilst Aunt Caroline went on vigorously darning a white stocking, not for a moment thinking of assisting poor Uncle Jasper, and talking volubly at him all the time.

"Barnaby Crabtree," she said, "has fastened on us like a hungry leech. Lord, how that man eats! Three large cups of tea this afternoon, and tea at six shillings a pound! I tell ye, Jasper, that if he does not leave this house soon you will have to carry me out of it in my coffin. . . . The best bedroom, too . . . and five weeks to-day since he came. . . . But now that Olive has come to stay with us," she added, more

loudly and impressively, "Barnaby has got to go!"

"Yes, my dear," said Uncle Jasper, who had not the remotest idea what his worthy wife was talking about.

Promptly did Aunt Caroline bring up one of her most regretful sighs.

"What I have had to endure in life," she said, "through marrying a man who spends his days on the top of a ladder, no other woman can possibly know. If I had only married Ebenezer Toogood, who wanted me at the same time as you did, Jasper, I shouldn't have had the whole of an entire household upon my shoulders, for Ebenezer did have other thoughts besides beetles and lizards. . . . And now," she went on with her usual irrelevance, "here's Barnaby Crabtree, whom you asked to come for three days and who has been here five weeks!"

The idea of Uncle Jasper asking anybody to stay anywhere or to do anything except leave him alone was distinctly humorous, but Aunt Caroline abhorred humour when household matters were being talked about — so she ignored it sedulously.

"But," she said, "I have quite made up my mind. Barnaby has got to go. . . . not to-day, because it is too late to order a chaise, though I doubt not but Sir Baldwin is so polite he would allow the old toad to travel in his coach. . . . No, no; I had forgotten — Sir Baldwin's coach has left already. . . . But no matter. To-morrow I can order Hickmott's trap to take Barnaby as far as Dover, and from there he can journey by stage coach to London. I'll pack all his

things — glad shall I be to be rid of him, and —"

But here Aunt Caroline's flow of eloquence was interrupted, not by Uncle Jasper, who never interrupted anybody, nor yet by Olive, who was still in the dumps up in her room, but by no other person than Barnaby Crabtree himself, whose stentorian voice was heard ringing from end to end of the house.

"I won't have it!" he shouted from the top of the stairs, and he could then be heard coming down them as fast as his fat legs would carry his fat body. "I won't have it, I tell you! . . . Cousin Caroline! . . . Cousin Caroline!" he shouted still more loudly. "Where in thunder are you?"

Aunt Caroline hastily put down her darning; I do believe that her hands were trembling, and that her round face had become very white. Uncle Jasper even had been startled by all that shouting, and, as usual when he was startled, he dropped the book which he had been reading, and then meekly ran down the library steps to fetch it.

He got the book, and was about to remount the steps again with it when Aunt Caroline simply darted across the room, heedless of eggs and stuffed lizards, that flew about in all directions as her voluminous bombazene skirt knocked them down off tables and chairs.

Just as Uncle Jasper put his foot on the fifth step of his ladder she caught him by his white-stockinged ankle and held on to it with all her might.

"Jasper," she whispered eagerly, "Jasper, come down — now is the time to put your foot down!"

But Uncle Jasper, with the strength of the weak and

the courage of intense terror, gave a vigorous jerk with his leg. His shabby buckled shoe remained in Aunt Caroline's hand, and he scrambled helter-skelter up the steps and once more perched himself on the very top, for all the world like a frightened crow.

Before Aunt Caroline could say another word the door of the museum was kicked open by a heavy foot and Barnaby Crabtree stood upon the threshold.

"Caroline," he shouted as he entered the room and marched across it with a short, shuffling stride, "have you sworn to be the death of me? Have you and Jasper entered into a conspiracy to murder me? I ask because if this goes on much longer you will have to carry me out of this house in my coffin."

He now turned and faced Aunt Caroline, wrath expressed in every line of his wide, flat face. She was standing at the foot of the library steps, still holding Uncle Jasper's buckled shoe in her hand. She would not have owned it to herself for worlds, but as a point of fact her heart was beating furiously and her knees were shaking under her. She was so mightily afraid of Barnaby Crabtree.

With the buckled shoe she tapped Uncle Jasper's legs, making him very fidgety and uncomfortable. He very nearly lost his balance, and twice his knuckles caught a rap from the shoe when he was rubbing his shins.

Barnaby Crabtree certainly looked very formidable. He was so very fat and big and seemed to take up such a lot of room, and he had a way of rolling his pale-coloured, fishlike eyes which gave his countenance a very weird expression.

Uncle Jasper gave a timid little cough as a preliminary to more lengthy speech. I suppose that he had suddenly made up his mind to this, because all the while that he was silent Aunt Caroline kept on rapping his shins with the shoe. And his shins were getting very sore.

"We should be very sorry, Barnaby," he said, "to . . . hem . . . if we were to lose you . . . hem. . . . Amicum perdere est . . ."

"Don't quote that abominable Latin, Jasper!" thundered Barnaby in deafening tones. "Do you want to see me go into hysterics?"

"God forbid, Barnaby!" ejaculated Uncle Jasper meekly. "That would indeed be a horrible sight."

"But what's the matter now, Cousin Barnaby?" asked Aunt Caroline, with sudden resolution.

"What's the matter, ma'am?" retorted Mr. Crabtree. "Everything's the matter. Noise and bustle, ma'am. Why did I come here, pray?"

"Ego cogito," sighed Uncle Jasper, "I am wondering."

"I came here for peace and quiet," continued Cousin Barnaby sternly, "and now that young person whose cap is always awry tells me that I am to be turned out of my room for your niece."

"Susan told you rightly, Cousin Barnaby," said Caroline, who was striving to look dignified, and ill-succeeding, poor dear, seeing that she was fidgetting nervously with Uncle Jasper's leg in one hand and his shoe in the other. "The room is wanted for my niece, Lady Jeffreys, who will make a stay here for a few days."

"A few days — a few days, ma'am? And who asked her, pray?"

"My niece comes when she likes, Cousin Barnaby. She asked herself this time."

"Dux femina facti . . ." murmured Uncle Jasper feebly.

"Don't do that, Jasper," roared Mr. Crabtree, "you give me the gripes."

"Dandelion roots chopped up fine," suggested Aunt Caroline, "with a dash of sweet oil . . ."

"Ugh! don't come round doctoring me, ma'am. . . . I tell you that all I want is peace. . . . I find your niece a disturbing person. . . . The sooner she goes the better I shall like it. . . . And you can tell her so if you like. . . . I don't care. I came here for peace. Tell that to your niece, ma'am — and peace at all costs must I have."

He went over to the sofa, and before you could guess what was his purpose he had calmly swept all the specimens on to the floor, and they rolled off and scattered about in all directions, whilst two eggs were smashed into little pieces. In a moment Uncle Jasper had dropped his book and was running helter-skelter down the library steps.

"Heavens, Barnaby," he ejaculated, "a valuable pair of eggs! . . . Owl's eggs!"

He was down on his knees, poor dear, trying to rescue the scattered specimens and examining the damage done to his precious eggs. But Barnaby Crabtree sat himself down placidly upon the sofa.

"Then," he said coolly, "I ask you, Jasper, in the

name of commonsense, is a begad sofa the proper place for owl's eggs?"

"Put your foot down, Jasper," whispered Aunt Caroline close to Uncle Jasper's ear. "Now is your time."

"Yes, my dear," replied he.

He was then lying flat down on the floor trying to arrive at a pair of blown frogs that had slid along the polished floor to an impossible spot under some heavy piece of furniture, right out of his reach. It was of course difficult for him in that position to put his foot down, seeing that both his feet, one shod and the other only encased in white cotton stocking, were quivering in mid-air, the length of his shins from the floor.

"Don't go fidgetting round me like that, Jasper," said Barnaby Crabtree irritably. "Can't you leave those things alone?"

"I am only collecting the scattered remains, Barnaby," said Uncle Jasper, struggling back to a more convenient position, "disjecta membra. . . ."

"Don't do that," thundered Mr. Crabtree.

"No, Barnaby."

And with this last meek little saying, Uncle Jasper finally relinquished all hope of being able to put his foot down, and I must say that Aunt Caroline made no grave effort in that direction either. At the back of her mind there lingered the thought that Barnaby Crabtree was "not strong"—such a favourite expression on the tongue of a motherly woman who has not a large family on whom to bestow the superfluous abundance of her kind heart.

Barnaby Crabtree had given Aunt Caroline so much trouble in the past five weeks that he had spent in the house, she had dosed him so persistently, and — as she thought — so successfully, with her home-made medicaments, that she took a great interest in his general health, and, believe me, she would greatly have missed him if he had suddenly made up his mind to go.

Therefore to-day, as on all previous days, Mr. Crabtree was left the master of the situation, and of the household. Aunt Caroline had been rendered anxious by the state of his health, which verged on apoplexy every time that he lost his temper, and Uncle Jasper had retreated to his perch, tired of strife, of noise, and of distractions, which took his mind away from the pleasing realms of romance where owls and bats reign supreme and frogs and lizards are of paramount importance. Cousin Barnaby lay back on the sofa, crossed his hands over his protruding middle, and gave a sigh of satisfaction.

"Where is that noisy young female," he said after awhile, when Aunt Caroline, having given up all thoughts of further strife, had quietly resumed her darning, "whose name sounds like a cold in the head?"

"Boadicea?" suggested Aunt Caroline.

"Now I ask you in the name of commonsense," interposed Barnaby irritably, "is that a proper name for a self-respecting young female?"

"She can't help her name, poor darling," protested Aunt Caroline.

"She can help spending half her day gyrating on

tree-tops and displaying various portions of her person which usually are kept from view."

You may well imagine how shocked was Aunt Caroline at such language. Her work fell into her lap, and for a moment was quite speechless, after which she merely gasped:

"Really, Barnaby!"

Then she picked up her work again, and for awhile she plied her needle in silence. But, as we all know, silence was not one of Aunt Caroline's most favoured virtues. Drawing her needle in and out, she became tired of saying nothing, and even Cousin Barnaby's conversation seemed under the circumstance preferable to no conversation at all.

"In the poultry yard," she remarked, "Boadicea is my right hand."

"A hand," he grunted, "that would be all the better for an occasional wash, ma'am."

Now, though Aunt Caroline devoted a considerable portion of the day in scolding and admonishing her niece, she could not bear anyone else to criticise either Olive or Boadicea, and now she was very indignant and said hotly:

"Barnaby, you are insulting the child — aye, and you insult me too, seeing that I have brought her up and still see to her hands and complexion. It's bad enough that you should eat the muffins which I had set aside for the poor child's tea, and now you must be adding insult to injury."

"Flagitio additis damnum!" murmured Uncle Jasper to the accompaniment of a short, weary sigh.

"Profane language now," shouted Cousin Barnaby,

who seemed very exasperated. "I cannot endure profane language."

And he who swore, morning, noon, and night!

"It was Latin, Barnaby," protested Uncle Jasper mildly.

"Then if you can't swear in English, Jasper, you'd best leave it alone."

Then he turned his attention once more to Aunt Caroline.

"There are a few other items, Caroline," he began, and I can assure you that this time his voice was quite unctuous, like that of a man who has infinite patience under most trying ills, "to which I may call your attention at a more fitting opportunity. For instance, the presence of an animated fly in the raspberry jam this morning, a condiment altogether distasteful in a preserve, and one that no self-respecting housewife should tolerate for a moment."

"We can't always help the flies getting into sweet things this time of year, Cousin Barnaby," she remarked meekly, "and I try to keep all jam and fruit well covered. It was you, if you remember, who left the raspberry jam uncovered after you had helped yourself at breakfast."

"It was not I who put the fly into it subsequently. But let that pass. I am not one to complain, and all I want is peace. We'll let the fly pass, Caroline, but there is another item to which I think your attention should be called, and that is the presence of a parcel of kittens underneath my bed. Now, even your own fault-finding and criticising disposition could not tax me with being the cause of the increase in your cat's

family, nor yet with persuading her to deposit that increase under my bed."

"Poor pussy! she looks upon your room, Cousin Barnaby, as her special stronghold. The dogs never go in there, and she feels that her little family is safe."

"Well! I have had the little family swept up into a basket and ordered Susan to deliver them over to Topcoat, with strict injunctions to drown the lot."

"You haven't done that, Barnaby?"

"Indeed, I have, and if Topcoat knows his business the drowning will have been effectually done by now."

"Oh!"

When Aunt Caroline was speechless it meant that she was very indignant indeed. She was quite speechless now, even though a few words did appear to be struggling upwards, out of her heart, and perished in the attempt. She collected all the socks and stockings into her basket, put down her needle and her thimble, and, still unable to speak, she flounced out of the room, to find Susan and Topcoat — Topcoat was the outdoor man, the one who swept the gutters, and kept the yard tidy, and attended to the horse and the waggonette.

If Topcoat had drowned the entire family of kittens without asking Aunt Caroline's permission and merely at the bidding of Barnaby Crabtree, well then Topcoat should be told that he was no longer a servant of Mr. Hemingford, and that the sooner he and his wife packed up their belongings and engaged themselves as servants to Mr. Crabtree the better pleased would Mrs. Hemingford be.

But then Topcoat had not drowned the entire family of kittens.

Still he got his scolding just the same: it would serve for another time, when he would be sure to deserve it.

CHAPTER VI

A WILD FIGURE OF A GIRL

When Aunt Caroline sailed indignantly out of the room Cousin Barnaby was not in the least disturbed. He may, perhaps, have been slightly vexed at her thus quitting him summarily when he had at least two more grievances to put before her — such as the noise which her guinea-fowls made in the early morning, a noise not unlike that of a blunt saw going through knotty wood, and which prevented his enjoying the quietude of early morning sleep.

"But," he remarked placidly, after the door had closed upon Aunt Caroline, "I am not a man who often complains. I came here for peace — and all that I want is peace."

Uncle Jasper was now once more deeply absorbed in his book and wholly unconscious of everything that went on around him. Barnaby Crabtree, though he greatly objected to self-absorption in anybody — seeing that people who were self-absorbed could not attend to him — knew that it was no use trying to drag Jasper's absent mind away from his books.

The afternoon, too, had turned very close. There certainly was thunder in the air, for Barnaby had a slight headache and a disturbed stomach, and he always knew that there was thunder in the air when he had a disturbed stomach.

He proceeded now to untie his neckcloth, and from his pocket he took a large, many-coloured bandana handkerchief. He shook it out and then spread it over his head, and finally folded his hands in front of him.

"Half an hour," he murmured behind the folds of the handkerchief. "I will compose myself. I trust that Caroline will have the good sense not to come and disturb me again about those damnable kittens. Females are so unreasonable where increases in families are concerned."

He went on muttering like this for quite a considerable time, but Uncle Jasper, of course, was quite unconscious of him and of his mutterings. He went on reading, and Cousin Barnaby sought refreshment in a little sleep.

The whole house became quite still, lulled into drowsiness by the closeness of the atmosphere. In the museum only Cousin Barnaby's snores were heard or the droning of blue-bottles against the small window-panes, and at regular intervals the flutter of paper when Uncle Jasper turned over a leaf of his book.

Suddenly this quietude was disturbed. From the yard there came the sound of a man's voice, raised angrily and insistently.

Cousin Barnaby awoke, and from behind his handkerchief he asked with great indignation:

"What in thunder is that?"

Then, as he received no reply to his peremptory question — which, by the way, he repeated at least twice — he tore the handkerchief from his face and shouted at the top of his voice:

"Jasper! Did you hear me ask what in thunder was that disturbing noise?"

"I heard nothing, Barnaby," said Uncle Jasper.

"Nothing? Am I deaf, Jasper, or am I a begad idiot?"

"Ego cogito!" murmured Uncle Jasper, "I am wondering."

But outside the voice had become even more loud and more peremptory. It was a man's voice — seemingly a young man's voice — and certainly it meant to make itself heard and its owner to be obeyed.

"Do I or do I not hear a most disturbing noise?" queried Cousin Barnaby triumphantly.

Uncle Jasper felt very worried and very nervous. He hated such interruptions, which, fortunately, were very rare at Old Manor Farm, and hated them still more when they came from the yard, for this generally meant that presently somebody would be knocking at the door of the museum, and probably would want to come in. It was therefore specially distressing at this moment to hear that tiresome voice outside saying peremptorily:

"I tell you, man, that I must speak with Mr. Hemingford at once!"

Fortunately Aunt Caroline, who had been administering the above-mentioned scolding to Topcoat, had lingered for awhile in the yard, examining the chickens and also the cart shed, and other places where untidiness might find a home, and a reproof be needed, which she might just as well administer since she was on the spot.

She it was now who came forward, and it was to

her apparently that the voice of the unknown young man now addressed himself.

"I beg ten thousand pardons, ma'am," it was heard to say agitatedly, "for this seeming intrusion, but a young girl's life is in peril. I ran here to get immediate assistance, but your man seemed not to understand."

"Good heavens!" Aunt Caroline was heard to exclaim. "What is it? Do come in, I beg, sir — just under the porch — yes, that's it! The door is on the latch. Mr. Hemingford is there."

And the next moment a young man stepped hurriedly into the room. Of course, Uncle Jasper dropped his book — he always did when he was disturbed — and equally, of course, Cousin Barnaby grunted with dissatisfaction.

Aunt Caroline had bustled in after the young man, administering a final scolding from the porch to Topcoat for having parleyed so long with a gentleman who evidently was in a great hurry.

The young man in the meanwhile had saluted Uncle Jasper and Barnaby Crabtree. Apparently he was very excited, for his good-looking face was flushed and he did not trouble to speak the polite words which the usages of society would demand of a stranger who was thus making intrusion in another gentleman's house. At once he began talking volubly, and paying no attention to Mr. Crabtree, who had muttered audibly:

"This man is a begad fool!"

"Sir, Madam," said the stranger excitedly, "I beg of you both to pardon my unwelcome appearance here.

Let me tell you what happened: I was walking along the lane, having come up from Minster and being on my way to Ramsgate, and just as I was going past your gates a young girl darted right across the road in front of me. She was so quick and so nimble on her feet that I followed her movements with much interest. Suddenly, even before I realised what she was doing, she climbed like a cat up an old elm tree, and thence on to the sloping roof of a barn which abuts on this house. The roof is a thatched one, and its angle very acute. She may lose her footing any moment, and —"

Even as he spoke, and before the next word escaped his lips, there was a terrific crash, followed by the noise of broken glass, all of which appeared to proceed from the loft at the end of the museum. The young man's face became pale with fright and Aunt Caroline gave one wild scream.

"The child!" and fell back, half fainting, against the back of the sofa, to which she clung now with one trembling hand, whilst with the other she picked up the corner of her apron and fanned herself with it vigorously.

Cousin Barnaby in the meanwhile had lost his balance; the impact of Aunt Caroline's body against the sofa had caused him to roll off it, like a big indiarubber ball, on to the floor.

Everyone was dumbfounded, and even Uncle Jasper realised that there was something wrong, for he ran very quickly down the library steps and stopped short at the bottom, his pointed knees shaking one against the other.

After the crash there had been an ominous silence in the loft, and the young stranger, who was the first to regain his presence of mind, had, with a curt "Allow me!" made his way to the wooden stairs that led up to it, when a girl's voice suddenly rang out, triumphant and clear:

"Got you! — got you! Shoo! — shoo! Go away! Mine! — mine! Got him! Go away!"

The next moment the door of the loft was thrown violently open, and a young girl's form appeared for one second on the top of the rickety wooden steps. She was dressed in something white that fluttered round her legs owing to the draught from behind. Her head was bare, but a wealth of brown hair flew all around it in a tangled mass of waves and curls. She was looking at something above and behind her, and in her two hands clasped in front of her she seemed to be holding something which she was endeavouring to protect. Only for one instant did she stand there, white and wild, like a woodland fairy; the next she had striven to run down the steps, had missed her footing, and come tumbling down the rickety flight, landing on the floor with feet outstretched, hair dishevelled, one shoe flying halfway across the room, and a piece of her skirt remaining fastened to a protruding nail on the steps.

"God help us all!" shrieked Aunt Caroline; "the child has killed herself!"

As if to belie these words then and there, the young girl burst into a prolonged fit of laughter.

She laughed and laughed until every dark oak beam shook with the echo of that whole-hearted mirth.

"Bless all your hearts! I am not killed!" she said, as soon as she was able to speak, which was not for some time, as laughter took away her breath. "How scared you all look — and there's Cousin Barnaby going to have a fit!"

And truly Cousin Barnaby did present a most pitiable spectacle. He had been scared out of his wits after being roused from placid slumbers, and his yellowish complexion was blotched with purple, whilst his pale-coloured eyes seemed to be starting out of his head.

"And I who came here for peace!" he said, as he groaned aloud, and looked with unmitigated disgust at the wild, dishevelled figure still sitting with outstretched legs and shoeless feet on the floor.

"The fright you gave us, Boadicea!" sighed Aunt Caroline, who had not yet recovered her evenness of mind.

"The bumps I gave myself!" retorted the young girl, still laughing. "By George, but I do feel sore!"

She picked herself up rather slowly, and holding one hand to her hip, which, indeed, must have ached considerably. She looked a little wide-eyed and pale, though she would not admit that she was hurt, and in the other hand she still held against her breast that which she seemed desirous to protect.

As the stranger stood back toward the door, she had not yet seen him; but he was watching her with considerable amusement, for, indeed, she looked a wild figure of a girl with her brown hair flying in all directions, her skirt torn, and her stockings full of holes.

Indeed, now that she was standing up, she pre-

sented rather a woebegone appearance. Her face was scratched and smeared with black and her hands were covered with grey dust.

"But where have you been?" exclaimed Aunt Caroline, with as much sternness as she could command.

"I'll tell you," began the girl, talking excitedly and volubly, and turning deliberately to Uncle Jasper. "You remember, Uncle, that short-eared owl you and I saw on the top of Farmer Upchin's barn an evening or two ago?"

"Yes, yes!" said Uncle Jasper, whose wrinkled, birdlike face had lighted up at mention of the memorable event. "Yes, yes! The Strix brachyotus, or short-eared owl."

"Well," she continued eagerly, "now I knew there must be a nest of them somewhere. I thought you would like the eggs."

"Yes, yes!"

"So I got them; but, by George, I did have a tear round!"

"A tear round!" groaned Cousin Barnaby. "Look at her stockings!"

"My dear child!" exclaimed Aunt Caroline, horrified.

But Miss Boadicea, wholly unconcerned, looked down calmly on her shapely feet and ankles encased in coarse cotton stockings, through which her great toe peeped out unblushingly.

"Ever seen a great toe before, Cousin Barnaby?" she said, as she suddenly held up her foot right under Mr. Crabtree's nose.

"Don't do that!" he shouted, for indeed he was

very furious, and we must admit that he had every cause to be exceedingly vexed, since he had come to Old Manor Farm for peace, and this June afternoon had been the scene of quite a number of disturbances.

"But the eggs, child?" said Uncle Jasper, with quite a show of eagerness and impatience; "have you got the eggs?"

"Hm — hm!" nodded Boadicea in response. "I climbed on to Upchin's barn after Mother Owl. She flew off. I scrambled down and then on to the poplars after her. But, Uncle Jasper, where do you think the nest was?"

"Well, my dear?"

"In our loft — just under the thatch by the skylight! Oh, I had a scramble for it, I can tell you! The thatch was so slippery after all this dry weather. I slid now up, now down. Scratched my knees, too! I tell you, Mother Owl was furious. She knew I was after her nest. But I got it at last — when, bang! I slid down again — this time on to the skylight, and through I went with a crash!"

She was quite breathless, for she had talked very fast, undisturbed by Cousin Barnaby's groans of disgust and Aunt Caroline's exclamations of horror. Now she paused a moment, and her face assumed an expression of pride and of triumph.

"But I've got the eggs for you, Uncle Jasper," she said.

And she looked down upon the precious thing which she was still holding to her breast. Suddenly as she looked the expression of triumph fled from her face, a look of dismay spread all over it.

"Yes, child, the eggs?" said Uncle Jasper excitedly.

A tangled bundle of brickdust and mortar, of twigs and dried grass, together with fragments of something white and a yellowish liquid, fell in a heap on the floor.

"They are smashed!" she exclaimed, as her eyes filled with tears and her arm dropped down to her side.

"Scrambled eggs!" remarked Cousin Barnaby placidly.

He really did enjoy her disappointment.

"Smashed?" cried Uncle Jasper in a piping treble, for he was truly horrified at the awful calamity; "no, no, child, not smashed?"

And while Boadicea nodded ruefully he was down on his knees turning over the remains of the destroyed nest, trying to find some fragment at least large enough to preserve.

"No, not smashed," remarked Cousin Barnaby, who knew how to be sarcastic; "eggs are usually much improved by being hurled six feet through a skylight."

"I am so sorry, Uncle!" murmured Boadicea.

She looked so conscience-stricken and with it all so quaint and funny in her torn skirt and stockings that the young stranger — who hitherto had politely kept in the background — betrayed his presence now by a loud and genuine outburst of laughter.

Boadicea quickly looked round, and, seeing him thus laughing whilst trying to regain his composure under her stern eye, she gazed on him for awhile in mute astonishment. Then she said curtly:

"Who is he?"

At her words everyone seemed suddenly to become aware of the stranger. Aunt Caroline, very flustered, hastily smoothed down her apron and put her hands to her head to see if her cap were on straight.

"Indeed, child," she said, "your wild mischief makes us forget our manners."

She turned to the young man, and bobbed him an old-fashioned curtsey.

"Sir? . . ." she said, half interrogatively.

"Lieutenant Carrington, of *H.M.S. Dolphin,*" he replied, standing very upright and giving Aunt Caroline a real naval salute, "at your service, Madam!"

"Lieutenant Carrington!" exclaimed Aunt Caroline. "Not Mamie Carrington's son? Mamie who was Mary Janet Culverston?"

"My dear mother," said the young man.

"Mamie's son! — Mamie's son!" reiterated Aunt Caroline, as with scant ceremony she placed her podgy hands on the young lieutenant's shoulders and drew him down until she could plant a kiss on both his cheeks. "Right welcome you are, sir, for your dear mother's sake! She'll have told you about me, I know. Caroline Pettigrew I was before I married Jasper Hemingford. Mamie's son, to be sure! Why, you were a mere lad when I saw you last at Crackmansthorpe. My! how you have grown since then!

"And this is Mr. Hemingford," she continued with eager volubility, and waved one hand toward Uncle Jasper and the other toward the young man. "Lieutenant Carrington, Jasper, of *H.M.S. Dolphin;* my friend Mamie Carrington's son. You remember her;

she was one of my bridesmaids. And you remember Mr. Hemingford, I am sure, Lieutenant Carrington."

"Jack you must call me, Mrs. Hemingford, please!" said he.

"Then Jack it shall be!" rejoined she, blushing with pleasure. "You remember Uncle Jasper, don't you?"

"Remember Uncle Jasper? Why, of course I do!"

And he shook Uncle Jasper cordially and very vigorously by the hand, whilst Uncle Jasper, rather absent, and certainly vague as to who the young man was and who was Mamie Carrington, murmured pleasing "How de do's?" and declared how well he remembered.

"By gad!" said Lieutenant Carrington gaily, "I remember this museum perfectly now. Though I only was brought here once in my nurse's arms, I thought it then the most wonderful spot on earth — in fact, it was my idea of heaven in those days."

"It is my idea of a rubbish heap now," grunted Cousin Barnaby, who thought it was fully time someone paid attention to himself.

"And this," said Aunt Caroline, politely turning toward him, "is our cousin, Barnaby Crabtree, who is paying us a short visit."

"Your servant, sir!" said the lieutenant.

"And now," continued Aunt Caroline, "I hope that you find yourself quite at home, sir."

"You are too kind, Mrs. Hemingford," said he.

"I don't know where you lodge, sir — I mean Jack," said she.

"On board the *Dolphin,* Madam."

"At any rate, then, I hope that you will give us the pleasure of sharing our homely supper with us to-night."

"I'll be greatly honoured, Mrs. Hemingford," said he, making her an elegant bow.

"Then you'll excuse me, sir — I mean Jack — I'll tell my niece Lady Jeffreys that you are here."

She had made this remark quite casually, having for the moment forgotten that Boadicea had been absent all the day, and knew nothing of her sister's arrival; and she was calmly sailing toward the door when the young girl was after her like a whirlwind.

"Olive!" she cried, "Olive here, Aunt? Where is she? When did she come? Why didn't you tell me she was here? Where is she? I'll go tell her!"

And she made impetuously for the door. But Aunt Caroline restrained her, putting on her most stern and most commanding manner.

"No, no, child; not just now," she said. "Olive is dressing, I think, and you know that she always hated being disturbed whilst she was so engaged. And I should hate her to see you in this state, too; she looks so lovely herself — and you, child, you look a perfect savage."

"I have always maintained that she is a begad savage," grunted Cousin Barnaby, who had no love for little Boadicea.

The child hung her head now, looking very penitent. Her sister Olive was the great love of her lonely life. She had a passionate admiration for the dainty and exquisite sister, who had gone out of her life, even at

the time that she herself was emerging out of girlhood. Just for the moment she felt ashamed of her torn clothes and ragged stockings, and would have liked to hide herself somewhere, so that Olive should not see her until she was more tidy.

"Wait a moment here," said Aunt Caroline, "and I'll see where Olive is. If she is in her room dressing, as I think she may be, you can slip quietly upstairs and smooth your hair and change your dress, so that you may look your best when she first sees you. Don't cry now, that's silly!" she added in a very low whisper, as she saw that Boadicea was on the verge of tears. "Lieutenant Carrington is looking at you."

"Caroline," came in reproachful accents from Cousin Barnaby, "are you forgetting that this is the hour for my glass of bitters? I shall have no appetite for supper if you neglect me like this. Not that I ever complain; but really I don't see why the presence of a stranger should thus make you forget your most elementary duties to me."

"Oh, come along, then, Cousin Barnaby!" said Aunt Caroline with some impatience. "I had forgotten you, it's true; but Susan will have put the bitters on the parlour table. Come along, then — and you, child, wait just five minutes, and then make no noise as you slip upstairs."

After which Aunt Caroline, with a final "I pray you to excuse me, sir — I mean Jack," went out of the room, followed by Cousin Barnaby.

CHAPTER VII

A LITTLE FURY OF WRATH

Aunt Caroline's high-pitched tones and Cousin Barnaby's loud-voiced grumblings were heard dying away across the oak-panelled hall and then in the small parlour which lay on the left.

In the museum where a little while ago there had been so much noise, so much bustle and also such loud laughter, there now reigned absolute silence.

Uncle Jasper, quite happy that for the moment neither his wife nor his Cousin Barnaby were likely to disturb him, had incontinently clambered up his favourite perch, and crossing one lean leg over the other, he had propped up his book on his bent knee and was once more absorbed in the wonders of science.

Boadicea — when Aunt Caroline and Cousin Barnaby had gone — remained standing beside the door, with her back to the rest of the room, which, you will say, was not polite, seeing that Lieutenant Carrington was there and he a guest in the house. But I think that for the moment Boadicea had forgotten his presence. She was thinking only of Olive and of the joy that would come to her presently, when she could embrace the dear beautiful sister, and hear from her all about her triumphs in London society, and admire

all her lovely dresses, and her jewels of which the wife of Sir Baldwin Jeffreys had, of course, a good number.

Boadicea was only thinking of Olive, and straining her ears to hear Aunt Caroline's footsteps going upstairs, and the opening and closing of a door, which would be the signal for her to make her escape, and to creep to her room, there to wash her face and hands and generally make herself look less like a savage, and more pleasing to Olive.

"Can't I get you a chair?"

Boadicea turned round very sharply: her mind was so full of Olive that she was quite startled when she found herself face to face with a young gentleman, whom she hardly knew, and who was smiling at her now in an amused kind of way which she did not like at all. It was he who had offered to get her a chair, and now he said quite kindly:

"You must be so tired after your prowess just now, and I have an idea that you must have hurt yourself when you fell down those stairs."

"I am not hurt," she said curtly.

"Perhaps only bruised," he went on, still smiling. "By gad! I thought you'd have killed yourself when you jumped from that elm on to a sloping roof. Scrums, little one, it was a jump, eh?"

She looked straight at him then, for his tone did not seem so sarcastic as before: and as she looked, she encountered a pair of grey eyes which twinkled with merriment, as well as with intense good-nature, and also with boyish enthusiasm at the recollection of her feat.

"I suppose I did give you a fright," she said.

He nodded in response: and suddenly for no reason whatever, she felt her blood rushing up to her cheeks causing them to glow with heat. She was very angry with herself for this, and still more so for the feeling of shyness which suddenly possessed her. However, she was not going to let this young man see that she was shy, nor think that her blushing cheeks had anything to do with the twinkling look in his eyes.

"I saw you," she said as curtly as before, "from the elm. I could see that you were scared."

"I would have climbed the elm after you," he rejoined, "but you were as agile as a cat, and I feared that I would do more harm than good."

He talked to her lightly and gaily as one does to a child, and his grey eyes travelled from time to time over her torn frock and her dusty hands, and after they had done so they again rested on her face, and she then felt that the blush in her cheeks deepened because the twinkle in his eyes became more pronounced.

"I suppose that you think me a savage, too," she said defiantly.

"I think that you are a very foolhardy and very naughty child," he replied, and just for a moment merriment died out of his face, and it looked earnest, whilst his voice sounded quite stern.

"I am not a child," she retorted.

"What else?"

"Miss Aldmarshe," said she, trying to look very dignified.

But at this earnestness fled quickly from his face,

and back came the merry smile round the clean-shaved lips, and that amused twinkle in the grey eyes.

"I beg your pardon," he said politely.

"Or Miss Boadicea," she conceded.

"Queen of ancient Britain!"

And he made her a deep bow, in the old-fashioned style, putting out his hand that she might rest hers upon it. She was about to do so, when looking down upon her hand — already extended toward him — she saw that it was very dirty, and covered with the contents of an owl's egg.

"Wants washing — eh, your majesty?" he remarked with that irritating pleasing humour of his, when he saw her look of dismay, and the quick withdrawal of the grimy little hand.

This time she felt an angry flush rising to the very roots of her hair.

"Well!" she said sullenly, "I suppose that a savage — even a Queen — would have sticky hands sometimes."

"Undoubtedly," he replied.

"I dare say," she continued with what she felt and meant to be biting sarcasm, "I dare say that the young ladies whom you know in London have beautiful white hands."

"Well, usually!" he admitted.

"And you like to take their hands — their beautiful white hands," she said, whilst in spite of herself her voice shook, and there was a silly, uncomfortable little lump in her throat, she would have given worlds to be able to swallow, "and would be ashamed to take the hand of a — of a savage!"

"By gad!" he exclaimed, "but you are a funny child — I! ashamed to take your little sticky hands? — not I — give me both of them — there — at once."

And he held out his hands, and looked on her with great kindliness: he was very fond of children and of young animals, and this quaint girl seemed a happy blend of both: and just now her obvious timidity, that first beginning of self-consciousness which only comes when the child has become a woman, rendered her excessively winning and charming to look at.

Having imprisoned both her small, sticky hands in his own strong ones, he drew her to him with a quick, masterful gesture, and in a jovial, brotherly way kissed her heartily on both cheeks.

To his astonishment, she became as red as a poppy, and then equally suddenly all the blood seemed to leave her cheeks, and she looked frail and pale: and then heavy tears gathered in her eyes.

"How dare you?" she said almost viciously, whilst with all her might she tried to free her hands from his grasp. "How dare you?"

"I don't know how I dare," he rejoined gaily laughing, much amused at her indignation and at her futile efforts to rid herself of him, "but so bold am I that I'll dare again."

And again he kissed her, despite her struggles: but now her head was bent because of the effort which she made, and thinking to kiss her cheeks his lips encountered her soft, round neck.

"How dare you?" she cried again and again, "let me go! let me go! — I hate you!"

But men are such curious beings. In the best of

them there is always something of the tyrant, and a great deal of the Turkish pasha. Lieutenant Carrington had no compunction whatever in thus teasing this child. She was only a child, and a tomboy, too, whom he had seen climbing trees and sloping roofs just like a cat, and he liked to hold her now, while she struggled, just in the same way as he would imprison a kitten that pleased him, and wanted to get away from him.

The more she struggled, the more gaily did he laugh, the more she showered her hatred on him, the more determined was he to snatch yet another kiss — to punish her because she was so silly and shy, and would not receive his brotherly kiss in the spirit in which he meant her to receive it.

And whilst they were struggling like this, he laughing, she almost in tears, the door flew open and beautiful Olive Jeffreys entered the room.

For a moment she stood quite still, and I assure you that just then her expression of face was anything but pleasant. There was a deep furrow between her brows, and as was habitual with her when she was vexed, she was worrying her under lip with her teeth.

But her general appearance was very beautiful, for she had exchanged her emerald silk gown for one entirely composed of shot silk in colour like an iridescent pearl, neither mauve nor rose, nor grey, but partaking of all these delicate tints, and with a satin stripe of pale golden yellow running down the delicate fabric, and tiny bunches of pink rosebuds with their leaves scattered here and there.

Filmy lace veiled the edge of the bodice and blended

in exquisite harmony with the tender flesh tones of her bosom. Round her neck she wore three rows of perfectly matched pearls, and in her ears she had long earrings of beautiful gold work set with pearls.

So charming an apparition was she that in a moment both Miss Aldmarshe and Lieutenant Carrington mutely and tacitly called a cessation of hostilities. He dropped her wrists, and she gave a quick exclamation of delight.

But already Lady Jeffreys's high-pitched voice had resounded across the museum.

"Fie, Lieutenant Jack," she said reprovingly, "I pray you leave the child alone! See! she looks offended like a bedraggled chicken. And you will be disturbing the entire household by making her howl."

She advanced into the room with her pretty, mincing step, toying with her lace fan as she walked, and anon she stood before the two young people who I must say were looking somewhat shamefaced.

Boadicea, still as red as a poppy, hung her head down heartily ashamed thus to appear after all before the beautiful sister, having wholly forgotten Aunt Caroline's stern admonition.

Olive gave the glowing cheeks a kindly, patronising tap with her fan.

"There, there, child," she said with a light laugh, "do not look so scared. Lieutenant Carrington was only trying to frighten you — he really does not care to kiss little girls — or even to look at them — eh, Jack?"

And she turned fully towards Lieutenant Carrington, standing — quite accidentally I have no doubt —

quite close to her sister, her daintily bedecked person in charming contrast to Boadicea's tattered appearance, her beringed and well-trimmed hands looking almost fairylike beside the grimy, sun-tanned ones of the younger girl.

No doubt Lieutenant Carrington realised the enormity of his offence, the sin which his eyes had committed by resting if only in brotherly kindness and gentle irony on any woman, save the most beautiful amongst all. The tone of familiarity with which Lady Jeffreys addressed him, showed that she was well-acquainted with him, and now he turned quite away from Boadicea and bowed with consummate gallantry to the beautiful lady, just as he would to the Queen, if she happened to be present.

She gave him the tips of her fingers to kiss, and this he did, having previously said most politely:

"When the sun appears, all lesser stars must necessarily pale."

Certainly the lesser star — if by that appellation he meant Boadicea — had paled very considerably. The child now looked white and sullen, and her eyes watched every elegant movement of Lieutenant Carrington, and every expression of his face with a glowering, wrathful look. How differently did he behave when Olive was present, how courteous was his manner, how delicate his speech! He seemed quite a different man to the easy-mannered, boyish fellow of a while ago, with his laughing eyes and sarcastic lips.

"There, little one," said Olive, whose melting glance had duly rewarded Lieutenant Carrington for his gallantry, "what did I tell you. He was only

teasing you — as he would have teased a kitten — without any ill-intention. Come!" she added, seeing that Boadicea still hung her head, "let me see you smile. Have you forgotten, child, that twelve months have gone by since last you saw me in London? Are you then not pleased to see me?"

But at this appeal Boadicea's sulkiness vanished, she threw her arms with loving impetuosity round the dainty form of her fair sister.

"Pleased?" she exclaimed, "Pleased? Why, Olive, I have been nearly crazy with joy, since I heard that you were here."

Her cheeks were once more aflame, for with this child who had never been taught to restrain the display of her feelings, the blood came and went in her cheeks, just as emotion carried her away or left her cold. Olive had great difficulty in extricating herself from the violent embrace and in rescuing her delicate coloured gown from the affectionate pattings of eager, grimy hands.

"Child! child!" she cried somewhat crossly, for she hated the harmony of her attire to be disarranged, "not so fast, and not so furiously. I am convinced of the depth of your affection, but that is no reason why you should crush my gown. It cost me over thirty guineas last week, and now your dirty hands will ruin it in a trice."

In a moment Boadicea's enthusiasm cooled down. Her arms dropped away from her sister's shoulders, and she looked down ruefully at her grimy hands.

"I am so sorry, Olive," she murmured.

"There!" said Olive impatiently, "do go and clean

yourself, child. You look like a little savage still, despite your growing years, and I must say that you still seem to behave like one. Does she not, Captain Jack?"

"No, no," he said in an absent, bored kind of way, as if the subject had no interest for him. "Miss — er — Miss Boadicea Aldmarshe was seriously trying just now to behave like a young lady."

"Behave like a young lady," retorted the young girl, with a wealth of scorn expressed in the quiet tremor of her voice, "Behave like a young lady? Not I! I hate your simpering, affected, odious young ladies with white hands and chicken livers. I can ride an unbroken colt — can they?" she continued, gradually working herself up to a passion of contempt and of wrath, her voice quivering, sobs gathering in her throat and tears in her eyes. "I can sit on a bucker, saddleless and bridleless, and not lose my seat — can they? I can handle a gun, and a spade and a rake, I can run a mile without losing my breath — can they? can they? I ask you! Can they rise with the lark, and plunge into the sea and swim half way to France? I can. But no doubt you admire their silly, mincing ways, their 'Oh's' and their 'Ah's' and their 'Fies's'! Well, I do not! I do not! I do not! I would not be like them. No! not for all the gowns that cost thirty guineas and for all the soft speeches and hand-kissings the popinjays of Pall Mall can give them!"

Her voice now was almost choked with tears of rage and shame that had gathered to her eyes. Lieutenant Carrington stood quite speechless! never had he

heard such a torrent of passionate wrath flowing from a woman's lips. Olive, too, while the child spoke was silent with amazement. And now when Boadicea paused either from want of breath or because her emotion was really choking her, all that Lady Jeffreys could say was a mild admonitory,

"Child! child!"

In a moment Boadicea's arms were round her sister's neck.

"Forgive me, Olive," she pleaded through her tears, "Olive, dear, darling, my beautiful Olive? you are different to anybody else, quite different, and I love you! I love you! I love you!"

Then she kissed Olive passionately, and the next second had run quickly to the door. Here, however, she turned, just as her hand was on the latch, and faced Lieutenant Carrington, who was still standing amazed, and supremely uncomfortable as many men appear when women are in tears.

She looked him straight in the face, her eyes glowing, her cheeks aflame, her lips red and moist: a most veritable little fury of wrath.

"But I hate him!" she said.

Then she opened the door, and flounced out of the room, banging the door to behind her, so that Uncle Jasper started from his absorption and looked down in alarm from his perch.

"Lord bless my soul, what was that?" he queried vaguely.

"Nothing, Uncle, nothing," replied Olive, "a little childish tantrum, that is all. Lieutenant Jack," she added, once more turning to the young man a serene

and smiling face, "won't you sit awhile? We can have a pleasant talk before supper, and Uncle Jasper need not disturb us."

And as a matter of fact Uncle Jasper, after the momentary interruption, had once more busied himself in his book, and was taking no notice of anything that might be going on.

CHAPTER VIII

A SOCIETY LADY

"THERE," said Lady Jeffreys, as she disposed her graceful person to its best advantage upon the sofa, and gave the cushions an inviting little pat, "come and sit beside me, Jack. You foolish boy," she added, seeing a quick blush mount to his cheeks, "it is quite proper. We are both guests in my aunt's house, and there's dear Uncle Jasper playing gooseberry."

She frowned a little as she spoke, for Lieutenant Carrington did not appear to be so eager to sit beside her as she would have wished, not even though she cocked her head on one side, like a pretty bird, and beamed an invitation at him through her shining blue eyes.

It would have been very ill-mannered not to respond. Lieutenant Carrington, trained in the best school of good breeding, could not at this juncture do less than bow gallantly and take his seat beside the fair temptress on the sofa. But he was obviously ill at ease, as young men are apt to be when a beautiful woman is kind and has a desire to be entertained.

Lieutenant Carrington was racking his brain to find an opening for polite conversation.

"Your sister is a curious child," he said at last, thinking to find a topic of unusual interest.

"Oh!" said Olive with a pout that became her pretty mouth remarkably well, "she is only the uncivilised product of barbaric surroundings. What can you expect from education that has been confined within the boundaries of Thanet?"

Then, as he made no comment, she said archly:

"Jack! you have forgotten to say that you are pleased to see me."

"Does so obvious a fact need stating?" he asked gallantly.

She gave him her hand, murmuring, "Flatterer!" and rewarded him for his gallant speech by a look through the veil of her eyelashes; a look which her admirers had oft told her was irresistible.

But Lieutenant Carrington having kissed the hand and withstood the look, appeared quite calm when he said:

"You have not yet told me what brings the beautiful Lady Jeffreys out of London in the height of the season."

"Did you wish to know?" she asked.

"Of course," replied he.

"Why," said she, "it was in order to see you, Jack."

"Your ladyship is pleased to jest."

"Do you doubt it then?"

"Oh!" he said, with a slight shrug of his broad shoulders.

A look of tenderness crept into her eyes.

"You know that I am in earnest, Jack."

"I entreat you, Lady Jeffreys," he pleaded, pointing to Uncle Jasper.

But she shrugged her shoulders and laughed.

"Oh!" said she, "he heeds nothing but his Latin and his beetles. Why have you become so cautious, Jack?" she added more seriously, "Why did you leave London so suddenly?"

"I had to rejoin my ship. . . . I—"

"Your leave does not expire for another month—your own sister told me this in London. Why won't you speak the truth?"

"I *have* told you the truth, Lady Jeffreys," he said, "before I left town."

"I thought that you cared for me, Jack," she sighed.

Now we all know that to play the part of a Joseph in commonplace, every day life, is not a pleasing task for any young man; and when the lady is very beautiful and very young and the man is chivalrous, it becomes indeed a very invidious one. Lieutenant Carrington would at this moment I believe have given up half his fortune to be safely back in his bunk on board the *Dolphin*. The harmless ballroom flirtation into which he had drifted quite unconsciously in London was threatening to assume proportions of which he had never dreamed and which almost frightened him. It is a fact that some of the bravest men have been cowards where women are concerned.

Lieutenant Carrington had distinguished himself by conspicuous bravery in the China seas, and yet now he felt an insane desire to take to his heels, and to run away as hard as he could go. For a moment the wild thought came into his brain to shout at the top of his voice and thus attract Uncle Jasper's attention, who

indeed was a most inefficient gooseberry, but I think you will agree that this would have been most unchivalrous behaviour, altogether unfitting a sailor and a gentleman.

So when Lady Jeffreys said languishingly, "I thought that you cared for me, Jack," all that he could think of to say in reply was:

"It is because I feared that I might soon do so, Lady Jeffreys, that I came away."

"To run away — like a coward!" she pleaded. "It does not seem like you."

"There are certain dangers which it were cowardly to court," he protested.

"Love is not a danger," she urged, "love is happiness."

Poor Jack Carrington felt that the air was getting sultry. He would now have given his very next chance of promotion for the chance of running away, and quite a good deal for permission to open the window. Never had he felt so completely at a disadvantage. Perspiration was running down his back, and his hair felt as if it had been fastened with gum arabic to his temples.

But Olive appeared quite cool; her skin was like ivory, and her cheeks had only a sufficiency of colour in them to make her eyes seem brighter by contrast, and her lips more red.

"You will come back to town with me, Jack!" she pleaded.

"Impossible, Lady Jeffreys," he said earnestly.

"Jack!"

"No."

There was a slight pause, during which Olive thought it best to sigh, and to produce a tiny bit of cambric edged with dainty lace.

"Then," she murmured, and up went the bit of cambric to the brightest possible pair of blue eyes, "it is all — at an end?"

"If what had no beginning," he rejoined gently, "can be said to have an end."

She looked at him over the diminutive pocket-handkerchief, and for the next few seconds appeared to be studying him very closely. She saw a young and good-looking face, with kindly grey eyes that seemed more accustomed to twinkle than to look stern, she also saw a well-cut mouth with lips firmly pressed together, and a strong jaw which showed no sign of a yielding disposition.

All this she took in with a scrutinising glance of her bright eyes, even though they were veiled with tears. It is wonderful how much a woman can observe through tears, and no doubt Olive saw everything that she wished to see, or rather everything which she would rather not have seen just now.

And then a very curious thing happened. But a few seconds ago there had sat upon the sofa an exquisitely beautiful woman with tear-dimmed eyes and a mellow voice half-choked by tender emotions, and the poignancy of regrets. Suddenly that woman was changed as if by the touch of a magician's wand, and Jack Carrington saw still sitting beside him a very handsome woman of the world, with stern, impassive face, and eyes darkened by an angry frown.

The voice too had changed. It was hard and tren-

chant now; and the languishing manner had gone, giving place to the collected and calm demeanour of a society lady who has just cause to rebuke an insolent admirer.

"But my letters!" said this same society lady in a harsh voice.

"Your letters . . ." stammered Jack Carrington. He was greatly bewildered at this sudden change for he was a young man and had had little or no experience of the curious ways of women.

"Yes!" she said impatiently, "my letters! I wrote to you often, and often injudiciously. I believed in your honour and poured out my heart sometimes in my epistles to you. Yours in response were very brief and cold. I see now, alas! how foolish and trusting I was; how cold and callous you were. There's enough matter in my letters to destroy the reputation of a duchess. Have you kept them?"

"Indeed," he stammered, still feeling very dazed and bewildered and vaguely wondering how much of this interesting conversation came to the ears of Uncle Jasper. "I may have kept a few."

"A few!" she exclaimed. "Hark! at the vanity of the man! A woman pours out the secrets of her heart to him in some impassioned letters, and he calmly keeps a few!"

"I swear to you, Lady Jeffreys," said Jack Carrington, who now felt sincerely sorry for her, "that those which I have kept — so presumptuously I own — shall be destroyed this very night."

"Pshaw! a man's vow to a woman!" she retorted. "I'll not believe you."

"But, Lady Jeffreys . . ." he protested.

"Unless I have my letters in my own hands, I'll never again know a moment's peace."

"Then I'll place them in your hands myself."

"When?"

"To-morrow."

"Too late. I must leave for town at break of day," she asserted unblushingly. "You could not present yourself in this house at such an early hour."

"Then I will send them to you by a trusted messenger."

"That they may fall into wrong hands!"

"Then what can I do?" he cried in genuine distress.

"Think! think!" she urged.

"Let me fetch them now and bring them back. I am lodging in Ramsgate, I could be back in less than two hours."

"Impossible. Supper will be served in a few moments; what excuse could you make for thus running away?"

"Then what can I do?" he reiterated again in complete despair.

She waited a moment, watching him with narrowed eyes, that certainly held no tears. Then suddenly she leaned forward, with an eager and bright look, and placed her hand upon his sleeve.

"Listen, Jack," she said, speaking low and fast. "I shall not know a moment's peace until those letters of mine are back in my hands. So this is what I think would be best. To-night, after supper, leave as early as you can with convenience and politeness,

but be careful to leave something behind — your mantle or your gloves. Then go back to your lodgings, fetch all my letters, and bring them to me."

"But, Lady Jeffreys . . ." he protested.

"Tush, man," she said, "it's quite simple. You can walk to Ramsgate in an hour, can't you?"

"In less — for I would run all the way."

"A quarter of an hour to get my letters, and order a horse to be saddled — you can do that?"

"Of course."

"And half an hour for the return journey," she concluded eagerly. "You would not be gone two hours, and Uncle Jasper never goes to bed before ten. If you will leave here soon after seven — you can easily find a pretext — your duty — or — or some important letters to write. When you return you will find me sitting in this room with Uncle Jasper for gooseberry. I will watch for you, and if you rap at the back door I will open it — Uncle Jasper will ask no questions, and if he does there will be your mantle left behind to account for your return. By to-morrow morning he will have forgotten all about you — so you see how simple it all is."

It certainly did sound very simple, and though at the bottom of his heart Jack Carrington strongly disapproved of the adventure, he could not think of any serious objection to make to it, nor of any strong excuse for refusing to obey Lady Jeffreys's commands. Inwardly he was cursing himself for having been so foolish as to keep those silly letters, which were nothing but the senseless ebullitions of a self-willed and headstrong woman. He was indeed being severely

punished for the harmless ballroom flirtation into which he had allowed himself to drift without thought of consequences. To him the whole thing had meant nothing but momentary amusement, and a certain satisfaction to masculine vanity, whilst she of course seemed to have forgotten how quickly a woman's reputation becomes the prey of the envious gossipmongers. Would to God that she felt that she could trust him; he was only too ready to destroy the letters, if only she would allow him to do so quietly in his own lodgings. But to this simple course she apparently would not give her consent. She now refused to trust him whom she had already so completely trusted. Perhaps she thought that he had acted dishonourably towards her — perhaps — oh! the awful thought — he *had* acted dishonourably, and was not worthy of a woman's trust.

You see that Lieutenant Carrington's meditations, whilst Olive urged her plan on him, were none too pleasant. A vague feeling of remorse weakened his will, and broke down the last barrier of resistance.

"Jack," she pleaded finally, seeing plainly that at last he was ready to give way, "I must trust to your honour in this. You won't deceive me again."

"Lady Jeffreys . . ." he stammered helplessly.

"You *will* do as I ask you, Jack?"

"I have no option, Lady Jeffreys."

"To-night, then, at about half-past nine, I will be here with Uncle Jasper. You will see the light in the window. You'll not fail to come, Jack. Promise me!"

And he promised.

CHAPTER IX

AN EXQUISITE APPARITION

At last the victory had remained with Olive Jeffreys. But she was far too clever a woman to press it further home. Jack Carrington was one of those men whose promises always seem binding on themselves, whatever might betide.

She gave a short sigh of satisfaction and leaned back against the cushions of the sofa. She rearranged the folds of her gown with a careless hand and so settled down for ordinary conversation.

To begin with she told Lieutenant Carrington that Sir Baldwin Jeffreys had elected to ride home only in the cool of the evening. Aunt Caroline had told her awhile ago of Sir Baldwin's changed intentions, and that he had gone to Minster to spend an hour or two before supper with Mr. Culpepper who was a very old friend. She was talking quite coolly, even though she could see that Lieutenant Carrington had frowned and flushed. No doubt the thought of meeting Sir Baldwin at supper to-night was not a pleasant one. But to the capricious, self-willed woman the announcement had not been altogether unwelcome. Excitement and intrigues were as the breath of her body to her, and she was not at all displeased when the thought crossed her mind that Sir Baldwin's

changed intentions might have been coincident with his hearing casually that the *Dolphin* lay at anchor in Ramsgate Harbour.

She was never averse to exciting his jealousy, which in a way seemed a homage rendered by him to her powers of fascination, and though at times she was a little afraid of him, yet she knew herself to be far too cautious and too clever to place herself thoroughly in the wrong before him when violence on his part might have been justified.

The thought that Sir Baldwin would be riding away to-night with the full knowledge that despite his machinations and his tyranny, she would still be thrown in the society of Jack Carrington, caused her infinite amusement; and if he further changed his intentions and did elect to spend the night at Old Manor Farm, she still meant so to manipulate the threads of her intrigue, that they would never enmesh her, but leave her triumphant, and happy in her *rôle* of an innocent and much maligned woman.

How she would manage all that, she did not at present know, but the thought of supper with Sir Baldwin sitting opposite to her and Jack Carrington by her side was distinctly exhilarating.

She heard her husband's heavy footsteps in the hall, a few moments after a loud toned bell had proclaimed the fact that supper was about to be served. Lady Jeffreys, satisfied that the young man seemed duly disturbed in his mind, began talking calmly about the weather and of the London season, and Lieutenant Carrington gave reply as best he could.

Soon Aunt Caroline came in, fussy and garrulous as

usual, dressed in her best puce silk and with a new lace cap on her head.

Sir Baldwin Jeffreys entered the room five minutes later. He was perfectly calm and self-possessed, and Olive had not even the satisfaction of seeing a look of jealous wrath in his eyes. He did not appear at all surprised at seeing Jack — perhaps Aunt Caroline or even Susan had told him that Lieutenant Carrington was here. Be that as it may, he bowed most politely if somewhat stiffly to the young man, and then addressed himself quite pleasantly to his wife.

Barnaby Crabtree's entrance, however, soon caused a diversion. He came in, grumbling as usual.

"Nothing so bad for the digestion, Caroline, as unpunctuality. . . . That wench of yours must be given a month's wages in lieu of notice if she does not learn to dish up to time."

Even before Aunt Caroline could enter her habitual meek protest, Susan, with her cap awry as usual, and her hands and feet very much in the way, came to the door and announced loudly:

"I've dished up, ma'am!"

Whereupon she appeared to have been scared by her own voice, for she fled back across the hall as if she had been shot out of a gun.

"Ten minutes late!" was Mr. Crabtree's parting shot at the flying Susan.

"I hope, Sir Baldwin, that you will excuse a very simple supper," said Aunt Caroline, whose cap was beginning to emulate Susan's in its gyrations down the slope of her head, "and you too, sir — I mean Jack; we are only country folk."

"Don't make excuses to Sir Baldwin, Aunt," said Olive lightly, "since he must make a start soon after supper he will be glad of a simple menu."

Aunt Caroline now went up fussing to Uncle Jasper, mounting half-way up the steps, and shaking him vigorously by the leg.

"Jasper! Jasper!" she shouted. "Lord bless us all, he'd starve up there first, before he took any notice. Jasper! Jasper! we are all waiting."

"Waiting," said Uncle Jasper blandly, "oh, don't wait, Caroline. I've often told you not to wait tea for me."

"The man is a begad idiot," muttered Cousin Barnaby.

"It's not tea, Jasper," said Aunt Caroline, impatiently, "it's supper — supper, and you've had no tea. Do please lead the way with Lady Jeffreys, sir — I mean, Jack, and you, too, Sir Baldwin, I pray you walk to the dining-room. I'll get your uncle down from his perch presently and bring him along with me. . . . But where's Boadicea?" she added, noticing for the first time that the child was absent.

"Are we going to have supper to-night, Caroline," interposed Mr. Crabtree, "or are we not?"

"Of course we are, Cousin Barnaby," retorted she, "but I must know why Boadicea isn't down yet — I hope she didn't hurt herself falling this afternoon."

"Tush, Aunt," said Olive lightly, "the child was shy. She's not used to strangers; she'll slip downstairs presently when we are all seated."

But this idea found no favour with Aunt Caroline. The traditions of Old Manor Farm demanded that

everyone should assemble in the museum before the principal meals of the day, and file in from there all together into the dining-room.

Therefore she now went to the door and called loudly at the top of her voice:

"Boadicea, child — are you coming?"

And from upstairs came the young girl's voice in response:

"At once, Aunt Caroline."

There was a patter of light feet on the polished oak staircase and a minute later the door of the museum was thrown open and Boadicea entered the room.

When I say that Boadicea entered the room I must admit at once that no one there present recognised at first who it was that was standing there in the doorway, framed by the heavy dark oak, and with the vague dark background of the hall behind like some picture of Sir Thomas Lawrence.

Anything more unlike the tattered, hoydenish apparition which Boadicea usually presented could not well be imagined. No wonder that Aunt Caroline and Olive, Lieutenant Carrington, and even Sir Baldwin, stared upon her quite speechless with wonder.

She had donned a high-waisted silk dress in colour like the ripe fruit of the lime, in cut somewhat old-fashioned, suggestive of the time when Boadicea's mother clasped her youngest baby girl to her heart. She had dressed her soft brown hair in a multitude of puffs and curls, which fell all round her young face, and were held up at the back of her head with a tall comb of filigree gold. On her feet she had a pair of transparent silk stockings and tiny bronze shoes with

cross-straps over the ankles. A soft fichu of muslin was crossed over her shoulders, and she had lace mittens on her hands. A bunch of pale blush roses nestled in her bosom, and a delicate blush suffused her cheeks.

She was as pretty and dainty an apparition as the fusty old museum had ever seen. The exquisite youth and girlishness which exhaled like fragrant flowers from her whole personality fascinated every beholder, save, perhaps, Olive, Lady Jeffreys, whose complexion had had to stand the wear and tear of two London seasons.

But Boadicea appeared quite unconscious of the sensation which she had caused. With mincing steps she advanced further into the room, toying with her fan and casting languishing glances on everyone around.

"Supper?" she said in a slow drawly tone to which her fresh clear voice seemed not altogether attuned, "Supper? Lud! I had forgotten — I am sure I could not eat a morsel — these hot days play havoc with one's appetite. Ah! Sir Baldwin Jeffreys! This is an unexpected pleasure. Glad will I be to hear the latest news from town. Cousin Barnaby, please lead the way — you, no doubt, are dying of hunger."

Then she turned with a smile and a simper to Lieutenant Carrington and holding out her hand she said:

"Shall we follow, Lieutenant Carrington?"

And he, smiling and bowing, and with a wealth of amusement dancing in his eyes, offered her his arm, which she took with the consummate grace of an elegant lady of fashion.

As Aunt Caroline would not let go of Uncle Jasper's sleeve, Olive was left to follow on her husband's arm, which she did with none too good a grace, whilst across the hall she could hear Lieutenant Carrington's whole-hearted laugh in response to some witty sally apparently made by transformed Boadicea.

CHAPTER X

A FULL-BLOWN YOUNG WOMAN

Supper that night in the flagged dining-room of Old Manor Farm had been extremely lively, and everyone who was unprejudiced would be bound to admit that the merriment which reigned around the table was entirely due to Boadicea.

She was vivacious in the extreme, keeping up a flow of small talk with Lieutenant Carrington and with Sir Baldwin Jeffreys which caused the latter no small measure of astonishment. Little Boadicea — whom he had known as a tomboy, usually with a grimy face and invariably with dirty hands — had suddenly developed into a full-blown, self-possessed young woman, with an endless fund of conversation and a marked talent for fresh repartee.

She looked remarkably pretty, too, now that her face became more and more animated as supper progressed and she felt herself an object of attraction and of praise.

Aunt Caroline had not begun to get over her astonishment. What had come to the child she could not think, nor why she should have chosen this particular evening on which to unearth from the bottom of an old oak chest, where it had lain in lavender for fifteen years, the lime-coloured silk gown in which poor dear Lucy had been presented to King George IV.

For the moment, however, Aunt Caroline was far too busy at her end of the table to study this puzzle deeply. She had Cousin Barnaby on her right, who was eating enormously, and Sir Baldwin on her left, who was eating nothing, and, what with urging Sir Baldwin to take a little more cold beef and Cousin Barnaby not to eat so much veal and ham pie, she grew redder and hotter every moment, until the seams of the magnificent puce silk gown seemed to be creaking and crackling all at once.

At intervals she scolded Susan in an audible whisper.

"You mustn't nudge that gentleman when you are handing the vegetables, Susan! Be careful not to put your thumb into the salad when you hold the dish — put your hand underneath! Don't offer the cream to Miss Boadicea; you know she doesn't really care for it, and there isn't enough to go round! Don't go breathing so loud when you are waiting at table — one would think you'd got asthma or something!"

Olive alone in the midst of this lively company appeared glum and silent. She ate very little, and once or twice she complained of the heat, asking for the window to be opened. She certainly had Sir Baldwin opposite to her and Lieutenant Carrington by her side, but both these gentlemen seemed to pay more attention to Boadicea than they did to herself — a demeanour which was wholly unpardonable.

It was she who gave the signal for the ladies to retire to the parlour, and she sailed majestically out of the room, followed by Boadicea and Aunt Caroline,

and with Uncle Jasper bringing up the rear. Uncle Jasper never cared to sit with the gentlemen over their wine; he never drank wine himself, and thought every meal such a bore that he never had the slightest desire to linger over it.

But it was the custom at Old Manor Farm that after supper Uncle Jasper should sit with the ladies in the little parlour, which was situated to the left of the front entrance door, and immediately faced the way into the dining-room opposite. In this little parlour there was an old-fashioned spinet, and Boadicea, who had had lessons for a year or two from the organist of Minster Church, used to play old airs upon it and accompany herself when she sang.

Tradition at Old Manor Farm also demanded that after supper she should sit at the spinet and sing Aunt Caroline's favourite tunes. These were, "I Asked my Fair One," and "Auld Robin Gray," and "Home, Sweet Home," which Mr. Bishop had composed. While she played and sang Aunt Caroline invariably went to sleep and Uncle Jasper fished a book out of his pocket and immersed himself in bats and beetles. Lately, too, Cousin Barnaby had added the bass of his snores to the treble of Aunt Caroline's, but this did not upset Boadicea's singing in the least.

She sang for herself more than she did for the others, as the birds sing in spring, because they are young, and gay, and alive, and not because anyone else is listening.

And to-night she went to the spinet as usual, unconscious of the pretty picture which she made there against the dull greyish white of the walls, and with

the light of the lamp just illumining her delicate profile, the curled lashes, and the moist lips parted as she sang.

Olive, who sat on the sofa beside Aunt Caroline, frowned whenever she looked across the room toward the spinet, and the tip of her foot beat an impatient tattoo on the floor. Aunt Caroline, as usual, was full of regrets and sighs, and she indulged in these whilst counting the stitches of her knitting.

The door which gave on the hall was open, and from the dining-room beyond came the drone of the men's voices talking over their wine. From time to time Mr. Crabtree's rose in a high-pitched alto.

"Will you be so kind," he would say loudly, "as to pass me the port, Sir Baldwin? People in this house are ignorant of the elements of hospitality."

Then Aunt Caroline would endeavour to catch Olive's glance ere she sighed resignedly.

"Come, Aunt," said Olive impatiently, on one occasion when Cousin Barnaby's remark from the dining-room sounded peculiarly rude, "it's no use making sheep's eyes at me like this, and sighing like one of those new railway engines. I can do nothing to help you. You and Uncle Jasper only get what you deserve!"

"But what can I do, Olive?" again sighed Aunt Caroline in utter helplessness.

"Two things," replied Lady Jeffreys resolutely; "Give that old Crabapple the go-by and send Boadicea to school!"

"With no less than three hairless offsprings," murmured Uncle Jasper, lost in his book.

Aunt Caroline gave a start, and her knitting fell on the floor.

"To school?" she ejaculated, in a state of complete bewilderment, "and with what?"

"In heaven's name, don't be so stupid, Aunt!" retorted Olive, whose temper was none of the best just now; "the matter is far too serious not to be seriously discussed. I said that Boadicea ought to go to boarding school for at least a year, just as I did at her age. The child has no manners. Either she behaves like a tomboy or like a pert minx!"

She had spoken acidly and at the top of her voice. Boadicea's hands dropped from the spinet. She turned on the music stool and looked straight at Olive, with eyes wide open in astonishment.

"Look at the way she behaved to-night!" continued Olive, whom the sight of Boadicea thus facing her seemed to exasperate still further.

"How did I behave to-night, Olive?" queried Boadicea.

"In a perfectly ridiculous fashion! The way you threw yourself at Lieutenant Carrington's head was positively indecent!"

"Olive!" exclaimed the younger girl reproachfully.

But Olive felt spiteful, and was not inclined to mince her words or to spare her sister's feelings.

"He was quite bewildered," she said. "I could see it on his face. He did not know how to respond to your bold advances. Gentlemen who are accustomed to the usages of good society and to the manners of well-educated young ladies don't always know how to deal with the embarrassing attentions which

they get from country girls. No wonder Lieutenant Carrington left so soon after supper!"

"He said quite early in the evening that he would have to rejoin his ship the moment he had swallowed his supper," protested Boadicea.

"Oh, he would not have gone so soon, I feel sure, if your behaviour had not rendered his stay uncomfortable."

"He certainly seemed in a great hurry to depart," commented Aunt Caroline.

Whereupon Boadicea ran to her sister in an agony of repentance. She fell on her knees, and, in her habitual impulsive way, put her arms around Olive's shoulders.

"I did not think that I had done any wrong!" she cried tearfully. "Oh, Olive dear, I wish you could teach me to be more like you!"

"There, there, child!" said Olive, somewhat mollified, though still rather acid and impatient. "For gracious sake, don't cry! Your nose is inclined to be red at all times; it will look swollen if you cry after a meal. They'll teach you manners at boarding school, and after that you must exercise proper self-restraint."

"Yes, Olive," murmured the girl meekly.

"It is not a bit of good showing a man that you like him. The more you try to run after him, the quicker he will evade you," continued Lady Jeffreys sententiously.

"I am sure," protested Boadicea, "that I neither like Lieutenant Carrington, nor did I have any desire to run after him, as you put it."

"Well, child, you acted as if you did! But there, in heaven's name, don't start whimpering again, and don't hang round me like this! You would ruin anyone's clothes!"

"Go back to your spinet, child!" concluded Aunt Caroline. "Olive and I have many things to talk over, and your uncle gets fidgetty at this hour if you stop singing."

Boadicea rose obediently and went back to the spinet. Tears still hovered on her lashes, for she was finding life more bewildering than she had anticipated. It did not seem quite so easy as she had thought to step from out the guise of a savage into that of a young lady. A silk frock and mincing ways were not sufficient, it appears. With humiliating self-deprecation Boadicea reviewed her own conduct most unfavourably, and, though she was quite sure that she did not care the least little bit what Lieutenant Carrington thought of her or her behaviour, she was equally convinced that she cared a great deal for Olive's opinion of her.

Her fingers now wandered idly over the yellow keys. She had not the heart to sing a lively song, and the only song for which she seemed to have a fancy just now was "On the Banks of Allan Water," and her voice lingered lovingly over the last line: "There a corpse lay she."

Tears came to her eyes whilst she sang; for some reason, which she could not have explained, she felt inexpressibly sad. The delight of seeing Olive had been marred in some way which she did not altogether understand. Her own behaviour, she thought, must

have had something to do with it, for the young girl was far too loyal to admit even to herself that there was any coldness or ill-temper in the sister whom she idolised.

For awhile the low hum of conversation between Aunt Caroline and Olive reached her ears, even through the melancholy music of "The Banks of Allan Water." Then after awhile there was silence in that part of the room; Aunt Caroline was busy with her knitting and Olive was wrapped in meditations of a pleasant nature, no doubt, for her ill-temper seemed to have vanished and there was a satisfied smile around her lips.

In the meanwhile Cousin Barnaby was making his presence felt in the house; in fact, he never allowed anyone to forget his existence for long. Now he was, as usual, calling for Aunt Caroline in a loud and unmannerly voice right across the hall.

"Cousin Caroline! Where the deuce are you?"

Uncle Jasper clutched his book. Cousin Barnaby had always the power to rouse him from his meditations, and now he half rose from his chair, obviously prepared to beat a precipitate retreat. But Aunt Caroline guessed his purpose, and before he could move out of his chair she had pinned him down again into it by vigorously pressing on his shoulder with a determined hand.

"No, no, Jasper!" she said resolutely, "you shan't go and perch upon that ladder of yours just now. I want you here. Now is the time."

"Tempus edax verum," murmured Uncle Jasper with a melancholy sigh.

"I said," rejoined Aunt Caroline sternly, "that now is the time to put your foot down, instead of quoting Latin to your lawful wife!"

In the meanwhile Cousin Barnaby had waddled across the hall, still calling loudly:

"Caroline, where the devil are you?" which, of course, was excessively ill-mannered and impolite of him, considering that he was a most unwelcome guest in Uncle Jasper's house. He now entered the parlour, looking for all the world like an over-fed drake; his napkin was still tied around his neck and hung down his chest like a bib. He had certainly overeaten himself, for his face was very red and his fishy eyes looked bleary.

"Strange," he said as he entered the room, "that women are never to be found when they are most wanted, and always about the place when you least desire their presence."

Uncle Jasper, egged on by Aunt Caroline, appeared to be making a gigantic effort to put his foot down; but the effort only resulted in the meek remark:

"Exceptio probat regulam!" which brought forth an irritable "Don't do that, Jasper!" from Cousin Barnaby.

At this point Sir Baldwin entered the room. He had given orders that his horse be brought round, for now he had no longer any excuse for lingering at Old Manor Farm, and he really did want to reach Ashford well before midnight.

As his wife made no motion to go up and speak to him, he made his way to the spinet, where Boadicea still sat idly fingering the keys.

CHAPTER XI

A MUCH-WRONGED WOMAN

Cousin Barnaby had not yet completed his list of grievances ere he retired for the night.

"And I have an idea, Caroline, that Susan has again forgotten to put a hot bottle in my bed."

"But I thought —" she protested.

"Then you shouldn't think!" he interposed rudely. "I hate women to think of anything — except of making people comfortable! And I still think that when I go upstairs I may find that there's no hot bottle in my bed."

"I'll see to it, Barnaby," said Aunt Caroline meekly.

"And put Jasper to bed. If I hear any more of his abominable Latin I shan't sleep a wink all night!"

"Yes, Barnaby."

All her determination seemed to have vanished, and she was no more likely to put her foot down than poor Uncle Jasper himself. Cousin Barnaby's tyranny over her good nature and her weak will had, in spite of all resolutions to the contrary, not received the slightest check throughout the day; in fact, it had asserted itself more overpoweringly than ever, and to such an extent that now, when he calmly ordered his hostess to take his host up to bed, neither of them even thought of disobeying.

"Come along, Jasper," said she, taking Uncle Jas-

per's arm; "your bedtime has come and gone by long ago. Come to bed now! Sir Baldwin will excuse you."

Thus appealed to, Sir Baldwin Jeffreys came forward and put out his hand with cordial farewell.

"I'll say good-night and farewell," he said pleasantly, "and thank 'ee again, Mr. Hemingford, for all your kindness."

"Good-night, good-night!" murmured Uncle Jasper absently. "It is very early yet to say good-night!"

"The hour is getting late," he said kindly. "Mrs. Hemingford, will you forgive me if I now take my leave?"

"Must you really be going, Sir Baldwin?" she asked.

"By your leave, Mrs. Hemingford."

"Your horse is saddled," she said, "and Topcoat has brought him round; but won't you change your mind again and wait until the morning?"

"Not this time, thank you, Mrs. Hemingford. I must indeed be going. If I do not reach Ashford to-night I cannot start for London early to-morrow, and my business is pressing."

"You must have something hot to drink before you start."

"No, no; I thank you!" he said, laughing; "your kind hospitality has dealt over generously with me already. I'll just say good-night to Mr. Hemingford and then make an immediate start. Please don't trouble further about me. I hate to give you all this trouble just when you are all going to bed!"

"It would have been better to make an earlier start," said Cousin Barnaby blandly.

"Not at all! — not at all!" rejoined Aunt Caroline. "We have been delighted to have Sir Baldwin's company! If you will excuse me, sir, I'll just see my husband up to his room, else he would be giving me the slip, and I would find him an hour hence perching on the top of a ladder and quoting Latin at a pack of stuffed lizards. Jasper," she added, "Sir Baldwin Jeffreys is bidding you farewell!"

"Ah!" said Uncle Jasper kindly, "I am sorry you must go, Sir Baldwin! You must come over some day when you have more leisure, and go through my collection of British beetles. It is the finest in England!"

"Thanks, Mr. Hemingford; I shall be delighted!"

"Come along to bed now, Jasper!" said Aunt Caroline.

"But my foot, Caroline!" he protested meekly; "my foot — er — you said I was to put my foot down."

"Oh, go to bed!" muttered Cousin Barnaby irritably.

"Yes, Barnaby. Good-night — good-night all! Nunquam non paratus — ever ready — ever ready!"

Boadicea ran up to him and kissed him tenderly, for she and Uncle Jasper were the best of friends. Olive yawned as she kissed him good-night, and as Aunt Caroline led him away he murmured pleasantly:

"Cedant arma togae — we yield to authority — to authority!"

At the door Aunt Caroline turned back once more to Sir Baldwin.

"I'll not say good-night yet, Sir Baldwin," she said. "I'll be back to see you start."

Then the door finally closed on them, and Cousin Barnaby gave a final grunt:

"What a deal of fuss there is," he said, "when a married man goes to bed!"

"The only thing," interposed Lady Jeffreys, with a yawn, "worth doing in the country is to go to bed. Good-night, child!" she added, turning to her sister, "I'll to my room."

"May I come with you, Olive?" pleaded the young girl softly. "I would love to help you undress. May I?"

"If you like," replied the other carelessly.

"I'll run and see that your room is in order, then."

And away she ran, grateful even for this careless word of approval, happy to be of service and to bask in the presence of the sister whom she loved. Here was the nature that was always prepared to give of the fulness of love, and content to take the crumbs of affection which fell from a careless and a barren heart. From childhood upwards she had been taught to worship and admire the beautiful elder sister, and it had never even entered her young mind to expect anything from Olive in return, save perhaps occasional approval and a tacit acceptance of her whole-hearted devotion.

She was a woman born to love, rather, perhaps, than to be loved. Her heart was too generous to accept; it was forever giving.

Sir Baldwin's glance followed her somewhat wistfully. He could not help at this moment contrasting the two sisters in his mind. And yet — how strange and perverse is human nature! — whilst giving ungrudging admiration to little Boadicea's splendid qualities, his heart found a hundred excuses for Olive's selfishness and egoism. His love for her had never cooled, in spite of the hard trials to which she put his devotion, and at any moment, even now that she had so wilfully deceived and angered him, he was only too ready to own himself in the wrong and to sue for pardon, there where forgiveness should really have come from him.

He had stepped out into the hall to see the last of little Boadicea, for she had already taken more formal leave of him, and he was standing there, still and with sorrow and doubt in his heart, when Lady Jeffreys casually brushed past him.

"Farewell, Sir Baldwin, since you must go," she said lightly, and, smothering a yawn, "I wish you a pleasant journey and a more comfortable sojourn in town now that you are so happily rid of me."

"Surely, Olive," he retorted earnestly, even whilst he stretched out to her a kindly, generous hand, into which she, after a moment's hesitation, carelessly placed her own, "surely you'll take kinder leave of me than this?"

She shrugged her shoulders with bored indifference.

"What would you like me to say?" she asked coldly.

"Anything that your heart might dictate."

"My heart is too sore," she said, "and too deeply

wounded to dictate anything more to me than an indifferent farewell."

"Wounded?" he retorted. "Great God! you can talk of a wounded heart when for months now you have done nothing but trample on my devotion, sneered at my love, and made of me the most wretched of men?"

"And what have you done, pray, for the past two years but angered me till I could bear it no longer? What have you done recently but flout me and insult me at every turn until I have become the laughing-stock of society and an object of pity to my friends? Truly," she added, whilst wrathful tears rose to her eyes, "if marriages are made in Heaven, some of them at any rate are finished up in hell!"

Her voice, always somewhat high-pitched, had risen in her anger until it echoed right round the oak-panelled hall. Sir Baldwin cast a quick, apprehensive glance round him, and, seeing that the door into the parlour was open, he said hastily:

"Olive, I pray you — be careful in what you say! Someone may hear you."

"Please don't mind me!" came in placid accents from Cousin Barnaby in the parlour; "there's nothing I enjoy more than overhearing a matrimonial squabble. It causes me to appreciate more keenly the fact that I am a bachelor."

"And I do not care who hears me!" retorted Olive defiantly. "I have no cause to hide my misery from anyone's eyes. You make it patent enough to everybody!"

"I?" he ejaculated in surprise.

"Yes, you!" she said in tearful anger, whilst sobs seemed to be choking her throat. "Why am I here now, I ask you, to the derision of half London and the pity and contempt of all my friends? You dragged me away from town in the height of the season, whether I wished to come away or not, just like a child who has been naughty and is being sent back to school! And all because of your senseless, insane jealousy! I cannot look at a man or speak to anyone in a friendly manner without your suspicions of my honesty being immediately aroused. You do not seem to realise that such suspicious jealousy is offensive and insulting in the extreme, and that no woman with the least sense of pride and dignity would fail bitterly to resent it. Look at your conduct to-night!" she added, lashing herself more and more into emotional fury, and becoming more and more unguarded in her language; "because Lieutenant Carrington — quite unknown to me, on my honour! — happens to be on matters of duty in this neighbourhood, and to be in this house to-night, your conduct becomes so offensive to me and to him that he is obliged to leave directly after supper, and all the servants' tongues now are wagging at my expense!"

This last attack was so unexpected that it left Sir Baldwin wholly unprepared and very much bewildered. He thought that he had done his best to hide the mortification which he had felt when first he heard that Lieutenant Carrington was in the immediate neighbourhood of Old Manor Farm. He had even prided himself on how well he had succeeded in this, and succeeded in persuading his over indulgent heart

that Olive's desire to spend some weeks at her aunt's house was a pure matter of coincidence, and that she had known nothing of Lieutenant Carrington's presence in Thanet when she made the arrangement.

He had also been so much amused by Boadicea's suddenly altered demeanour that he had really paid but little heed to Lieutenant Carrington. His wife's accusations, therefore, took him wholly by surprise. He thought that indeed he must have shown remarkable ill-temper quite unbeknown to himself.

"Surely," he stammered, feeling profoundly apologetic, "your ladyship is pleased to exaggerate? Believe me, I —"

"No, no!" she broke in vehemently, "I'll take no excuse! My heart, as I remarked before, is too deeply grieved for words. Your horse is saddled," she continued a little more calmly, "and it is best that you should go now — your absence may ease the burden of my sorrow and heal the wounds which your cruel jealousy has dealt me. I'll try and forget!"

Here she almost broke down. The tears were trickling down her cheeks and emotion had gripped her by the throat. She paused a moment, making noble efforts to control herself, and her face now looked singularly pathetic in its grief.

"But please go now," she whispered with sorrowful gentleness. "It is best, I think, that we should be parted for a little while, and I am afraid that I might break down under the strain of so much trouble. No, no; please do not approach me!" for he had instinctively drawn near to her as she spoke. "I could not bear it! — not now. Good-night! Good-bye!"

Pressing her handkerchief to her eyes, for she was crying bitterly, she turned away from him and slowly walked upstairs. Sir Baldwin himself felt overcome by emotion. Her pathetic appeal had gone to his heart; he felt himself to be a brute and a tyrant, who had wholly misunderstood the simple and childlike nature of an innocent young girl, who knew nothing of the world, and whom it was his duty to protect and not to render miserable.

He watched his wife's retreating figure with an ever-increasing feeling of remorse and of tenderness, chiding himself for an ill-mannered lout and a cruel task-master. He made resolve better to understand her in future, to be more forbearing and more trustful. It was terrible to hear her sobs dying away in the distance as she mounted the stairs.

"Is she often taken like that?" queried a bland voice close at his elbow.

CHAPTER XII

A JEALOUS MAN

COUSIN BARNABY had come out of the parlour, and was standing beside Sir Baldwin. He, too, seemed to have been watching Lady Jeffreys's retreating figure as she went upstairs.

"Is she often taken like that?" he reiterated, nodding in the direction of the door through which Olive had disappeared.

"No, no!" replied Sir Baldwin, who seemed somewhat absent, and like a man talking to himself rather than to an indifferent listener. "No, I have never seen her like this before — so emotional — so appealing and gentle — as if she really cared! It is a new phase in her complex character which I had not observed before."

"A new fiddlesticks!" rejoined Cousin Barnaby calmly. "As for me, sir, when a woman begins to cry, I immediately begin to suspect!"

"To suspect what?" queried Sir Baldwin abruptly.

"Mischief!" replied Mr. Crabtree curtly.

"Mischief?"

"Yes, sir — mischief! Women live in mischief as a bird does in feathers. If you suspect them, you deceive yourself; if you don't, they deceive you!"

Now, we all know that there is nothing on earth so easy to arouse as dormant jealousy. If it is there,

and it sleeps, the merest whisper will awaken it. In a moment the remorse and good resolutions of a while ago fled to the four winds. The poisoned sting of a venomous wasp had wrought its evil already.

"But surely you don't think—" murmured Sir Baldwin.

Then he paused, for he was ashamed to display his jealous suspicions before this vulgar, obese creature, who seemed to wallow in mischief-making as a fly does in honey.

"Oh!" said Mr. Crabtree blandly, "I don't think anything! I came here for peace, and the very thought of clandestine meetings and lovers' intrigues is abhorrent to me. The worst of it is, sir, that there are too many women about the place. Women and sailors, as I have remarked to you before, are the most peace-disturbing elements in the world! That fool Jasper shouldn't live so near the sea. Inland you get the women, but not the sailors. I had a bilious attack once, but no headache. It was quite tolerable."

But he might have gone on rambling along in his talk like this for hours. Sir Baldwin was paying no attention to him; he was nursing the aching sting which the poisonous wasp had left in his heart.

"Tears," he murmured, "tears!"

Then, with sudden fury, he muttered through clenched teeth:

"Oh, if I thought that!"

All his wrath had returned, and his jealous suspicions were fully aroused. It was strange that for the second time to-day these strong suspicions should have come to him just when his horse had been

brought round, and he had been ready to start. It almost seemed as if Fate was giving him a warning, telling him not to go.

But now surely he could frame no excuse for delaying his departure. He would become the laughing-stock of the household by remaining here another twenty-four hours. He could not stay at Old Manor Farm, guarding his wife until the *Dolphin* had raised anchor, and in the meanwhile he would be incurring still further the hatred and contempt of Olive.

Aunt Caroline was even now coming down the stairs with Sir Baldwin's mantle on her arm and his hat in her hand.

"I hope I haven't kept you waiting?" she said as she descended; "your mantle and hat were so covered in dust I had to give them a brushing."

"Oh, thank you so much, Mrs. Hemingford!" said Sir Baldwin, rousing himself from his unpleasant meditations; "indeed, I seem to have been giving you a great deal of trouble to-day!"

"No, no; it was no trouble!" she said in her usual fussy way. "Do come into the dining-room now. A hot stirrup-cup awaits you there."

"No, no! A thousand thanks, dear Mrs. Hemingford, I really could not take it!"

"But you don't look well, Sir Baldwin! Really you should just take something — you have looked upset all the day."

"Yes, yes; just a little upset, dear Mrs. Hemingford! I — I haven't felt quite myself all to-day. The heat, I think. It's nothing, I assure you, and please don't think any more about it."

"A little dandelion root," she suggested, "with a dash of sweet oil?"

"Yes, that is it!" he said more cheerily; "a good household remedy is all I want. And now it is fully time that I went. A thousand pardons, dear Mrs. Hemingford! I ought not to have kept you up so late!"

She helped him on with his mantle and he took his hat from her.

"I ought to have gone half an hour ago!" he added, cordially shaking hands with Aunt Caroline first and then with Mr. Crabtree, who responded very coolly. "Good-night again, and good-bye, dear Mrs. Hemingford! And — and —"

He drew nearer to her, and at the same time cast a quick glance at Barnaby Crabtree, to see if he were out of earshot.

"Yes, Sir Baldwin?" said Aunt Caroline, who felt still a little anxious about him, owing to his agitated manner.

"You will look after Olive, won't you?" he whispered.

"Of course we will!"

"You don't think — you don't really think that she would —"

"That she would what?"

"Nothing, nothing!" he concluded hastily, once more shaking her by the hand. "Good-night, Mrs. Hemingford!"

She felt a little puzzled, and gravely shook her head as she went to open the front door for him.

He raised his hat and made her a final bow, and at last went out into the night.

The full moon lit up the narrow white lane as it went winding upwards in ribbonlike curves towards the main Ramsgate road. Every tree and every leaf upon the trees stood clear and distinct against the intense blue of the sky. From afar came the soft, incessant murmur of the sea, dashing her breakers against the white cliffs far away. Intense peace reigned all round; only the south wind, which came breathing gently from the coast, stirred the delicate leaves of the poplars, till they glittered like silver in the moonlight.

When Sir Baldwin Jeffreys had given Topcoat half a sovereign, and was mounted ready to start, he caught Aunt Caroline's anxious eyes fixed curiously upon him. She was standing in the doorway, and he bent down from his saddle as if he desired to say a final word to her.

She came up to him, and patted his horse's neck, whilst he whispered very earnestly to her:

"Dear Mrs. Hemingford, take care of Olive! She is very young and — and — a little thoughtless. I beg of you to keep an eye on her!"

The tears were gathering in her eyes, for he spoke very gently and sorrowfully; and, indeed, she was quite sure that he was a kind man and Olive very thoughtless and wilful.

She made him the promise which he asked of her; then he once more bade her farewell, and, pressing his knees against his saddle, he turned out of the drive.

Aunt Caroline watched him for awhile from the doorway with the puzzled look still in her face.

"Dear me!" she sighed, "I wonder what has disturbed him? What a strange temper he was in all day, to be sure! — at times so furious and the next moment quite sad and gentle. There he goes!" she added, as Sir Baldwin, having turned out of the gates into the lane, set spurs to his horse and set off at a gallop —"there he goes, lashing into his poor horse! I wonder now what has upset him?"

"His liver, most likely," said Mr. Crabtree placidly. "I found him a most disturbing person. I am glad that he, at least, has gone away."

And Aunt Caroline having lighted his candle for him, he waddled off with it like a big, fat drake towards the stairs, and then up to that part of the house where his bedroom was situated.

But Aunt Caroline shook her head. She was not altogether satisfied in her own mind. However, for the moment she carefully shut and bolted the front door, then she called loudly to Susan.

CHAPTER XIII

A FAIR TEMPTRESS

Susan was already standing at the foot of the stairs, candle in hand.

"What are you doing there, Susan?" asked Aunt Caroline sharply.

"Nothing, ma'am!" replied Susan with a grin.

"Then leave off at once, and close up for the night."

"Yes, ma'am!"

Nominally it was Susan who closed up for the night at Old Manor Farm, but actually it was Aunt Caroline who saw that every shutter was put up and every bolt gone home. Topcoat fastened all the outside gates and made the round of the house, lanthorn in hand, to see that everything was safe before he finally retired for the night in the little cottage which closely adjoined the old house.

From the floor upstairs there came from time to time the sound of Cousin Barnaby's raucous voice, calling loudly:

"Caroline!"

"Yes, Barnaby!" she would shout in response; but she made no attempt to go upstairs until she was satisfied that all the closing up had been conscientiously done.

Then she ordered Susan up to bed, and she followed — the last to go up — first paying a visit to Cousin

Barnaby's room to see that he had everything he wanted, then knocking at Olive's door to ask if she was all right, then going into Boadicea's room to kiss her "good-night," and finally going to her own room, where she had to scold Uncle Jasper, who was sitting up reading by the light of a candle, which everyone knows is a very dangerous thing to do with so much dry woodwork about.

At last every noise in the house was hushed. It was dark from attic to cellar, and soon even the lights which peeped through the narrow chinks of the doors of various bedrooms were extinguished one by one.

Apparently everybody inside Old Manor Farm was asleep. From Cousin Barnaby's bedroom came the sound of vigorous snoring, but otherwise everything was still. From outside there only came the soft sighing of the breeze through the quivering poplar leaves, and at times from the distant marshes the call of bittern or heron, or perhaps the lowing of a cow in distress.

The footsteps of Topcoat had resounded for awhile as he made his tour of inspection round the house; then these, too, died away, and the silence of the night fell upon the old house and its sleeping inmates.

Downstairs in the hall the old grandfather clock struck ten.

Two minutes later a door on the upstairs floor was very softly opened, and a figure, clad in diaphanous white, emerged tip-toeing upon the landing. Through the windows the rays of the moon struck full on this part of the house, throwing into bold relief the top of the staircase, with the closed dog-gate, and the

richly carved balustrade, and the dark oak doors with their knobs of shining brass, which gave on the several bedrooms on this landing.

Now it also lit up with its soft, silvery light the figure of Lady Jeffreys, candle in hand, silently crossing the landing and noiselessly descending the stairs.

From outside came the muffled sound of a horse's hoofs on the sandy lane. Olive paused halfway down the stairs, listening intently. The horse's steps had halted just outside the gates of the drive. She waited a moment until she heard a man's footsteps on the gravel, then she ran quickly down the last flight of stairs, shielding the light of the candle with her hand against the draught, and found herself in the hall opposite the door which gave on the museum.

This was locked, of course, and bolted. Olive had to put the candle down before she could manage to unfasten all the bolts; these gave her a good deal of trouble, for she had to push them very gently, lest anyone should hear. The dogs had started barking in the distant cottage gardens, and, to Olive's anxious mind, it seemed as if presently the entire household would be astir. She had no idea that a nocturnal visit in a country house would be fraught with quite so much danger of discovery.

At last she had contrived to open the door of the museum, and she now found herself in the long, narrow room with fantastic shapes of birds and beasts all round her, the tallow candle flickering in her hand and throwing huge grim shadows against the whitewashed walls and the raftered ceiling.

A slight sense of superstitious terror sent a cold

shiver down her spine. Great, gaunt arms seemed to be pointing at her from every corner of the room, and wide-open jaws to be gaping at her, showing polished white teeth.

One of the dogs at Topcoat's cottage was still growling, but the others further away had apparently gone to sleep, satisfied. Shaking off her nervousness, Olive put down her candle and boldly went to the outer door. Here she found less difficulty in undoing the bolts; though large and heavy, they worked easily in their sockets. In a few moments she had undone them, and also the chain. But she did not open the door; she went back to the centre of the room and calmly proceeded to light the lamp which stood upon the table.

Whilst she was thus occupied, there came a knock at the outer door. She said "Come in!" in an even voice, and finished adjusting the wick of the lamp until it burned clear and bright.

In the meanwhile Lieutenant Carrington had entered. He was looking round him now, somewhat bewildered, and when Lady Jeffreys turned to him, and impulsively held out both her hands, he said apologetically:

"A thousand pardons, Lady Jeffreys! Am I very late? You said ten o'clock, did you not? and it is only a few minutes since I heard the hour strike on Minster tower."

"No," she said with a winning smile, "you are not late, Jack! Just in time, in fact, for Mr. Crabtree is snoring and everyone is fast asleep."

"Then let me acquit myself of my duty," he re-

joined. "I have brought your letters, Lady Jeffreys. I came as quickly as I could, but when I saw the house looking so dark and quiet I was half afraid to come near."

Whilst he spoke he was fumbling in the pocket of his coat, and presently he drew from it a packet of letters held together by a rose-coloured band.

"It was very presumptuous of me to keep them at all, Lady Jeffreys, and do please try and believe me when I give you my word that at your command I would have destroyed them to-night, and thus spared you the annoyance of this visit if I could."

He was still holding the letters, but she made no movement to take them from him; she stood for awhile looking at him with eyes that seemed to shimmer in the lamplight, and then she walked deliberately to the sofa and sat down.

"Come and sit by me, Jack!" she said invitingly.

"But, Lady Jeffreys," he urged, "do you not think that I ought to be going? On my honour, I should not have come at all, had I not pledged my word to you! You have said yourself that the household was abed."

"Well!" she retorted with gentle irony, "and are you frightened to spend a little time alone with me?"

"No! But I think that Mr. and Mrs. Hemingford would ill approve of my being here at this hour. I feel that I am repaying like a cad their kindness and hospitality."

"And has it never struck you, Jack," she said earnestly, "that there is someone in the world more important than yourself?"

"There are thousands of people in the world more important than myself, Lady Jeffreys!"

"Yet you only think of yourself at this moment!"

"I don't quite understand."

"I mean," she said, with increased vehemence, "that, manlike, you have talked of nothing since you came into this room but of your honour, and your promise, and your feelings when you found that the household was abed, and your return for Aunt Caroline's hospitality. For me you have not one thought, not one consideration. Think what I have risked in the past few months in order to give you pleasure! The letters which now lie on the table, which you have so carelessly thrown aside, testify to a woman's selflessness as against man's egotism. I did not give a thought to my own reputation, my own peace of mind, or the opinion of other people; but I thought a great deal of you, Jack, and of making you happy."

"You have made me very proud, Lady Jeffreys, both in the past and at the present moment; but I should prove the blackest ingrate, as well as an arrant scoundrel, if I did not now beg your leave to go!"

Unconsciously Jack Carrington's voice had become more trenchant and hard. He was not by any means the unsophisticated young bumpkin whom Lady Jeffreys could hold under her thumb. He had realised by now that he had been trapped into this anomalous position, humiliating to any man of feeling and of honour, and that he had fallen stupidly into the trap from which now he would find it very difficult to extricate himself without leaving behind him a few shreds of his own self-respect.

"You shall go directly, Jack," she said, holding out her hand to him with a winning gesture; "but not just yet. Come and sit down here and let us talk. Five minutes," she pleaded; "there, and I promise you that you shall go!"

Then as he very reluctantly complied, and sat down next to her, feeling angry with himself for what he termed his weakness, chiding himself for his stupidity, she settled herself down amongst the cushions like a kitten that has found a comfy, downy place in which to curl up contentedly.

"There now!" she said, "am I such a formidable ogress that you should be afraid of spending half an hour alone with me? Come now! tell me, did you not guess that I could not bear to part from you whilst jealous eyes watched our every movement?"

"There was no question of parting, Lady Jeffreys. I hope that we may often meet again."

"How cold you are! I thought that you cared for me, Jack!"

"Lady Jeffreys!"

"Why not call me Olive?"

"Lady Jeffreys!" he said firmly, "may I go now?"

"Yes, yes! You may go — directly; but not just yet, and not — not like this!"

She was leaning towards him, her eyes seeking his, the tendrils of her hair brushing against his cheek, her hand stealing forward to meet his.

"We could be so happy together, Jack," she murmured, "if only you thought a little less of yourself and a little more of me! You don't seem to understand how a woman can thirst for happiness — how

she longs for some response to the burning wishes of her heart! Oh, if you only would listen to your heart, Jack, which — I know it — I feel it — already beats for me!"

And two lovely white arms crept round Jack Carrington's neck and a pair of red lips asked for a kiss. He was young and she was beautiful; who would be pharisaic enough to condemn him if just then his heart was softened and his resolutions gave way before this charming temptress, who offered her beauty so unreservedly to his caress?

Jack Carrington was only a man; there was nothing of the saint about him, and he was heart-whole. No other woman's image interposed itself between him and the exquisite ripe and luscious fruit which only asked to be plucked and enjoyed.

"Tell me — just once, Jack — that you love me!" she whispered, "and the memory of your voice will make me happy through all the misery of loneliness which I have to endure! Tell me — just this once — that you love me, and then I promise you that, if you still wish it, you shall go!"

It is said — and oft with truth — that the whisper of a beautiful woman is heard above the loudest call of duty. In this case, though the woman was very beautiful, duty had not troubled herself much about calling. But now a slight noise — a creak upon the stairs — suddenly recalled Jack Carrington to himself, even when temptation seemed to be stronger than he could withstand.

"Hush!" he said quickly. "Listen!"

"What is it, Jack?" she whispered, and her en-

circling arms tried to keep him by her side. "Is it so difficult to say the three magic words which will make a lonely woman happy? Only three words, Jack—'I love you!'—and I shall be satisfied!"

"Hush, I say!" he said, suddenly wrenching himself free and jumping to his feet, "there's someone at that door!"

This time she obeyed, and the passionate words of reproach died upon her lips. Thus for a moment did they both remain silent, he standing, she half-cowering on the sofa, listening intently, with every sense strained, scenting the danger which threatened them, both from that creaking stair and the muffled footsteps which were heard descending.

Resolutely Jack walked to the door and opened it. The next second he had drawn instinctively away from that open doorway back into the shadow.

Boadicea, clad in a loose white robe, her brown hair falling in heavy masses over her shoulders, was standing on the threshold.

CHAPTER XIV.

A THIEF IN THE NIGHT

Olive saw her sister and quickly smothered a cry of alarm. She stared at Boadicea for a moment or two as if she were seeing an apparition, or perhaps a somnambulist whose mental consciousness was not present; the young girl certainly made no movement to enter the room. She could not from where she stood see Lieutenant Carrington, but she could see her sister, and was gazing on her with wide, terrified eyes, which gradually softened as she gazed until they became appealing and gradually filled with tears.

"You?" gasped Olive at last, when she realised that the young girl was indeed here with her full consciousness, and obviously with some definite and earnest purpose. "What are you doing here?"

"I heard your voice, Olive," murmured Boadicea, as she took a step forward into the room. "I knocked at the door once or twice, but you didn't hear me, and I didn't like to come in."

Now she had seen Jack Carrington, for she had turned her head for a moment, and looked him straight in the face. Her eyes expressed nothing as she did so but amazement, and they wandered from her sister's face to that of the young man, as if trying to understand something which was beyond her comprehension.

Olive was the first to recover complete mastery over herself. She had been a little scared by her sister's sudden advent, but this feeling soon gave way under a sense of irritation; she was angry with Boadicea for having succeeded in frightening her.

"So you thought you would do a little eavesdropping, eh, little one?" she said acidly.

"No, no, Olive!" replied the girl, who indeed now seemed the most frightened of the three. "I came because —"

She checked herself, for her voice was trembling, and she made a sudden effort to speak more calmly. She came up to the centre table, taking no notice whatever of Jack, and quietly facing her sister.

"I couldn't sleep to-night," she said, "and sat by my open window — until just now. I saw a man on horseback in the lane — he dismounted at the gate and came stealthily round the house to the yard."

"We know all that, child!" rejoined Olive carelessly. "Lieutenant Carrington forgot his mantle when he left earlier in the evening, and he came back to fetch it. I also happened to have been sitting at the open window, and, seeing him arrive at so late an hour, guessed that something serious had brought him back, and ran down to open the door for him before he roused the entire household, which he had been on the point of doing."

Boadicea listened to her sister's peroration quite calmly, then she gravely shook her head.

"No, no; I was not thinking of Lieutenant Carrington's arrival, for that, too, did I see; but that was some time before. It was only a quarter of an hour

ago that I saw this second horseman in the lane — saw him dismount at the gate and then steal round to the yard. He has been prowling round the house for some time. I meant to call Susan at first; then, when I was on the landing, I thought that I heard your voice coming from the museum."

"Tush, child, you've been dreaming!" said Olive, with a shrug of her comely shoulders. "Thieves do not arrive on horseback!"

"Hark!" broke in Boadicea hurriedly, "I can hear his footstep on the gravel now. He is at the front door."

"Miss Boadicea is right!" now interposed Jack Carrington firmly. "There is someone in the drive at this moment."

Olive suddenly became as white as her gown. There are moments in life when the coming danger is so potent, so terrible, that it casts the shadow of an awful prescience over the mind. Olive now saw through the thick walls of this house — saw right through the darkness of the night the owner of those footsteps upon the moonlit drive. She saw the approaching danger, and fear gripped her so suddenly and so overwhelmingly that her heart stood still and her limbs felt weighted with the terrible weight of unreasoning terror.

"Jack!" she murmured in a hoarse whisper, "if it should be —"

She dared not breathe the name, lest its very sound realised all the nameless horror which held her almost physically by the throat.

"I'll go and see!" said Jack Carrington, resolutely turning toward the hall.

But this Olive would not allow — not without a struggle at any rate; she would not see her fears made real, her terror become tangible. As Jack with a firm step walked towards the door she ran to him, stretching out both her arms and clinging to him, forcing him to pause. At first she could not speak; a half-inarticulate cry escaped her from time to time, an appealing "No, no!" and a vigorous, entreating shake of the head.

Her lips and tongue were so dry that she did not seem able to frame the words, and Boadicea, forgetting her own puzzlement and her own fears, ran to the loved sister and put her own protecting arms round the trembling figure with a gesture that was quite motherly in its encouraging tenderness.

"Olive!" she said softly, "Olive, dear, what is the matter?"

"Don't go, Jack!" the poor frightened woman now contrived to say; "don't go to the door! If it should be Sir Baldwin! He was mad with jealousy to-day; he suspected me, perhaps, and has set a watch on me. My God! If it should be he!"

Jack Carrington stood for a moment irresolute. It was pathetic to see this wretched woman clinging in such terror to him. Instinctively his glance sought that of Boadicea, as if mutely asking her advice as to what was best to be done.

There came a loud knocking against the front door. The midnight prowler, whoever he was, was tired of

waiting outside, he desired to enter. Olive smothered a cry of anguish.

"Listen!" she murmured. "It is Sir Baldwin, I am sure!"

"But why should you think, Olive, that it is Sir Baldwin?" urged Boadicea, in a quick, encouraging whisper. "Let me go and see."

"No, no, child!" pleaded Olive; "don't leave me, don't leave me! I am in danger, little one — in great danger! If my husband finds me here at night — alone with Jack — he may kill me! — he may kill me!"

"Olive!" exclaimed the young girl, horrified.

The knocking at the front door was repeated. This time it was more loud and more peremptory. Lieutenant Carrington and Boadicea looked at one another with a feeling of utter helplessness, for Olive was clinging to the young man, clutching at his arm with the frenzied strength of terror, so that he could not move from where he stood.

"Lady Jeffreys," he urged, "I do entreat you to let me go and open that door! Whoever is knocking there will rouse the house if I do not."

But she paid no attention to him, and whilst clinging to him she made heartrending and incoherent appeals to Boadicea.

"I've done no wrong!" she pleaded; "but Sir Baldwin won't understand. I swear to you that I've done no wrong! You believe me, little one, don't you? Say that you believe me!"

"Of course, I believe you, Olive dear; but do allow

Lieutenant Carrington to go to the door. I am sure Aunt Caroline will hear, and will be coming down directly."

"Promise me — promise me first that you will agree with everything I say to Sir Baldwin."

"Yes, yes, I promise! Do go and open the door, Lieutenant Carrington. I can hear Aunt Caroline moving overhead."

The knocking now was peremptory and incessant; obviously it was bound to rouse the household sooner or later. At Boadicea's promise Olive released Lieutenant Carrington's arm; he went out of the room quickly, and his firm step was heard crossing the hall. Within the next few seconds he was busy with the bolts and bars of the front door.

"Hush! Listen!" whispered Olive, when Jack Carrington slipped the chain, and said in an audible whisper:

"Who are you? What do you want?"

"I am Sir Baldwin Jeffreys!" came the loud response. "Open the door before I smash it in!"

A shiver ran through Olive's frame, and she gathered up round her shoulders the filmy folds of a lace scarf which she wore. Her cheeks and lips were of a dull ashen hue and her eyes were dilated so that they looked dark and cavernous in her pale face.

"It is Sir Baldwin!" she murmured. "You will help me, child. You swear it?"

"I swear it, Olive!" said the girl simply.

Now the sound of men's voices speaking in anger and contempt rang right through the house.

"Sir Baldwin Jeffreys?"

"Stand back, man; stand back!"

"One moment, Sir Baldwin!"

"Not one instant, man! Let me pass!"

"Not before I know —"

"You shall know nothing until I have dealt with her! Let me pass, or —"

But during this brief colloquy Olive had quite regained her calm. Hastily, whilst this brief passage of arms went on in the hall, she had readjusted the tumbled folds of her gown and passed her fingers over the lines of her face, as if instinctively trying to smooth them away. She composed her lips into a conventional smile, and with a great effort she steadied the trembling of her limbs.

Thus Sir Baldwin saw her, when, with a loud curse and a volent gesture of uncontrollable rage, he pushed past Lieutenant Carrington and strode to the door of the museum.

"Olive!" he thundered loudly, as soon as he caught sight of her, "Olive! — as I suspected, by all that's damnable!"

She confronted him quite calmly, allowing him a full view of her clear eyes and the contemptuous smile on her lips. He looked wretched and over-tired, his eyes had dark rings round them, and a slight foam appeared at the corners of his mouth. He was hatless, and his iron-grey hair was matted against his temples. His clothes and boots were covered with mud, and in his clenched hand he grasped his heavy hunting crop.

So evil and wrathful did he look that Boadicea's fears all returned to her; she no longer wondered that Olive had been so frightened when first she suspected

that it was Sir Baldwin who had unexpectedly returned. There was such a wild look in his eyes that it was obvious that he had not full consciousness of his actions, and the expression of fury in his face, together with his threatening gestures, showed that a dangerous mood was on him, which might drive him to some awful and desperate deed.

He looked at no one except at his wife, and as he looked on her the whites of his eyes became bloodshot and a curious hissing sound escaped from his throat.

There was silence for a second or two whilst he stood in the doorway, preparing, no doubt, for vengeance, whilst Boadicea felt that the beatings of her heart must be heard through this awful, this appalling stillness; then suddenly Olive's high-pitched voice broke the solemn silence with a long, rippling laugh.

"Well, upon my word!" she said lightly, "this is a surprise! Where are your manners, Sir Baldwin, falling into my uncle's house at this hour of the night? — and in such guise, too! Why, look at your boots! — and what in the world have you done with your hat?"

"I'll apologise for my manners, Lady Jeffreys," he replied, trying to contain himself, and speaking in a voice that trembled with rage, "when you have explained to my satisfaction how you happen to be alone, and at this hour of the night, with Lieutenant Carrington, when the rest of the house is in bed!"

"The rest of the house!" she exclaimed, with well-feigned astonishment; "and do you quite ignore my sister Boadicea?"

"Truce to this nonsense, Lady Jeffreys!" he re-

torted roughly; "and if you have any shame left in you, leave your innocent sister's name out of this matter!"

She shrugged her shoulders with contemptuous indifference.

"My aunt and uncle are coming downstairs," she said; "are you proposing to insult me before the entire household?"

"What explanation is necessary, sir," here interposed Lieutenant Carrington, "I am prepared to make. I hold myself entirely at your service; but, for the ladies' sake, I entreat you—"

"Sir," broke in the irate man, "with you I mean to deal later! For the moment I demand an answer from her!"

And he pointed a resolute hand at his wife. The next moment he took a quick step forward, and with that same hand seized her wrist so violently that she gave a quick cry of pain.

"My God!" he exclaimed hoarsely, "I mean to have that answer now!"

"You shan't touch her!" cried Boadicea defiantly, as she put her arms round her sister, and, like a young cat, was ready with fingers and nails to defend her against her assailant, whoever he might be; "you shan't touch her! She's done no wrong! I tell you, she has done no wrong! You shan't hurt her!—you shan't!"

CHAPTER XV

A BELOVED SISTER

Even whilst Boadicea was screaming defiance at Sir Baldwin, like a wild animal protecting its young, heavy footsteps were heard coming down the stairs. The household, aroused originally by Sir Baldwin's knocking at the door, had quickly tumbled into some clothes. Aunt Caroline was the first to seize a candle and to drag Susan out of her room after her. She picked up a poker, prepared to fight an army of burglars, not recognising the voice of Sir Baldwin Jeffreys, and thinking that wholesale murder was being done downstairs. Uncle Jasper, too, had struggled into his breeches, vaguely wondering what all this disturbance was about; but, since his wife had called him, he followed her meekly down the stairs. Barnaby Crabtree, furious at being disturbed, had also jumped out of bed, and he now stood on the threshold of his own room, volleying a string of expletives at everybody.

"What the — why the — how the —"

Curiosity getting the better of his laziness, he, too, followed in the wake of Uncle Jasper, and it was a motley crowd of terrified humanity that poured into the museum, and stood there gaping in hopeless bewilderment at Sir Baldwin Jeffreys and Olive, at Lieutenant Carrington and Boadicea. Aunt Caroline, in a

crimson flannel dressing-gown, with her hair done up in innumerable tiny plaits, which, being tight and stiff, stood out all round her head like the prickles of a porcupine; Uncle Jasper, in tight black knee-breeches, his thin, bare feet shoved into a pair of buckled shoes, his high-crowned bald head adorned with a white cotton nightcap, his pale eyes blinking in the glare of the lamp.

And Barnaby Crabtree, like an angry turkey-cock, muttering incessantly:

"Why the — what the —

"Why in thunder does not someone explain?" he shouted at last.

"The explanation is simple enough," said Olive calmly. "Sir Baldwin Jeffreys, having left his commonsense and his manners behind, has chosen this extraordinary hour and place in which to insult me!"

"Insult you?" retorted Sir Baldwin scornfully.

He looked somewhat like a bear in a pit now, who has been chained up and is unable to do all the mischief which it had intended. Clearly he could not murder his wife in the presence of all these people. But his wrath had not abated, even though it could not find sufficient vent for the moment.

"Insult you?" he reiterated savagely.

"Yes," she retorted, "to insult me! Your insane jealousy has put us all into a ridiculous and anomalous position. Boadicea, child," she continued, quietly turning to her sister, and taking her by the hand, "will you explain to this — this raving madman — that I came down here half an hour ago in order to play gooseberry to you?"

"For Boadicea?" exclaimed Sir Baldwin.

"Yes, for Boadicea. Is there anything very extraordinary in this? Come, little one, don't be shy! Sir Baldwin apparently does me the honour to imagine that I am lying. Will you assure him that I speak the truth?"

"Olive is speaking the truth, Sir Baldwin," said Boadicea firmly.

Her cheeks were very pale, but her voice was quite steady. She understood at once what her sister desired of her, and she accepted the humiliating *rôle* without demur.

"But what does it all mean?" exclaimed Aunt Caroline, whose brain worked very slowly at all times, but more especially at this hour of the night, when all self-respecting folk should be in bed.

"Dictum sapienti sat est," murmured Uncle Jasper, who felt it incumbent on himself to assert his authority at this juncture—"a word to the wise is enough."

"Don't fuss, Aunt Caroline!" said Olive; "there's no harm done in this except the irreparable harm done to me through Sir Baldwin's unjustifiable conduct! As for Boadicea, I assure you that she was quite all right—were you not, little one?"

"Yes, Olive, I was quite all right."

"Is it to be wondered at that her head was turned by Lieutenant Carrington's attentions? She gave him this rendezvous; but I am sure she meant no harm."

She was quite motherly in her manner toward Boadicea, stroking the child's loose hair with a gentle hand. But across Boadicea's bowed head she threw warning looks to Jack Carrington, who seemed every

moment on the verge of giving away the whole infamous trickery, which aimed at a pure woman's reputation, in order to safeguard that of a miserable coquette.

"You gave Lieutenant Carrington this rendezvous, did you not, little one?" she insisted with tender solicitude.

"Yes!"

"Fortunately, I could not sleep to-night. I heard the child creep out of her room, and I followed, so, of course, there was no harm done. These two young people are very thoughtless, Aunt Caroline; but they acted in the innocence of their hearts. At any rate, I'll vouch for Boadicea!"

"Child, child!" said Aunt Caroline sternly, "how could you so far forget your modesty?"

"And then get caught in the act!" growled Mr. Crabtree spitefully.

"Deprendi miserum est — it is sad to be found out," said Uncle Jasper under his breath.

Olive now turned triumphantly to Sir Baldwin Jeffreys.

"You see," she said coldly, "how simple it all is, and how your furious jealousy has brought scandal on the child."

"It will be the talk of Thanet!" said Cousin Barnaby placidly.

"I'll never survive it!" murmured Aunt Caroline through her tears.

Boadicea said nothing. She hung her head, enduring passively Olive's motherly caresses, and wondering in her heart why this public disgrace had been put upon

her, and why Olive — beautiful, exquisite, perfect Olive — should have taken the trouble to tell such a lie about her, seeing that from this time forth the whole countryside would know that she was a forward minx, who gave rendezvous to young men at dead of night. But for this she cared little. Olive had been in grave danger at the hands of her husband. She had done no wrong, and yet her life had been threatened by him, and it was only this tale of Boadicea's disgraceful conduct which had averted a terrible catastrophe.

Therefore, though she wondered at the cruelty of the whole thing, she was quite willing to endure it, so long as Olive's safety required it. She was a little ashamed to meet Lieutenant Carrington's eyes, but at the same time she felt bitterly resentful against him. If Olive had done no wrong, he certainly had by coming to this house at night, since coming to a house at night was more wrong than coming to it in the daytime.

But for his presence here and now, Sir Baldwin's advent would not have mattered in the least. Olive would not have been so frightened, and Boadicea would never have been put face to face with the terrible alternative either of betraying her own sister or of standing ashamed before all these people.

"And now that we have cleared this simple matter," concluded Olive finally, "perhaps you, Sir Baldwin, will be pleased to depart, and allow this respectable household to go peaceably back to bed."

"Simple matter, do you call it?" retorted Sir Baldwin, who throughout this while had been still nursing

his jealous suspicions; "a simple matter that a young girl — my wife's own sister, and scarce out of the nursery — should have been thus ready to cast aside her honour, and but for your interference might have brought lasting disgrace upon us all!"

"Hold on, man!" protested Lieutenant Carrington in a loud voice; "hold on, or I'll make you swallow your own words!"

"I'll not hold on, sir!" retorted Sir Baldwin hotly; "and 'tis you should be made to swallow every lying word with which you induced a thoughtless girl to forget her duty. You came like a thief in the night, prowling about a respectable house in order to rob it of its most precious possession — the honour of its child!"

"Nay, here do I brand you a liar, Sir Baldwin, and stand at your service when you will! But before I have the opportunity of making you eat your words, understand from me that Miss Aldmarshe deigned to grant me an interview to-night in the presence of Lady Jeffreys, her sister, because I had told her that to-morrow my ship will raise anchor and sail for the Mediterranean, and ere I left Thanet I desired to beg from her the honour of her hand in marriage."

"And she refused you?" sneered Sir Baldwin, whilst his mirthless, harsh laugh echoed along the old oak rafters. "Ah, I have you there! — the pretty story indeed! It's not true, I tell you! — it's not true! You are all lying — every one of you! And I am not to be fooled with such a likely tale. You asked for an interview at dead of night? You asked for her hand

in marriage, and she refused you? It's not true, I say! — it's not true!"

"It is quite true, Sir Baldwin," said Boadicea very quietly. "Lieutenant Carrington did ask for my hand in marriage — and I have accepted him."

There was dead silence after that. The young girl stood alone in the midst of a circle of gaping faces, six pairs of eyes gazed on her in mute astonishment. But she never flinched. Olive's life and happiness had been in danger, and she had been shown the way how to avert the catastrophe. It was no use making any sacrifice by halves. As to the future — well, that was in God's hands! He would see to it that no grave harm came to her through the intensity of her love for her sister. On the whole, the situation which she herself had so boldly created at the last moment was more endurable than the former one, and she would not allow Lieutenant Carrington to be more ready for sacrifice than she was herself. After this, though she would still be blamed, her reputation would not be irretrievably tarnished, and Aunt Caroline and Uncle Jasper could still hold up their heads among the neighbours; and she felt that she had earned Olive's love quite completely now, for Sir Baldwin hung his head, thoroughly humiliated, and even began murmuring vague words of apology.

"'Tis no use doing that now," said Olive coldly; "the sooner you return to Ashford, the kinder it will be to my uncle and aunt, whom your jealous temper has so unwarrantably disturbed. As for me, only your prolonged absence could teach me how to forgive you!"

These were the last words which reached Boadicea's consciousness. After that everything became blurred. She felt just as if she were in a dream. Aunt Caroline and Cousin Barnaby were dream-people, so were Olive and Sir Baldwin, and she herself felt as if she were one of those dolls that are made to move by invisible hands pulling the strings. She seemed to have no wish, no thought, no feeling, save one immense longing to fly to her room, to lock the door, and to throw herself on her bed — not to sleep, but to cry. She felt terribly sad, with a great, big ache in her heart, just as if she had lost something that was infinitely dear to her. The worst of it was that she did not know what it was that she had lost; all that she knew was that something was gone — something that had made everything much more beautiful than it had ever been before, something that had gilded the sunset and flicked the tiny clouds with rose, something that had tinged the meadows with glorious colour, and caused the tone of the nightingale's voice to sound infinitely sweet.

But that was long, long ago; now that something was gone. She knew that it would never come back; that in the future the sunset would be grey and the meadows brown, and that she could never again bear to hear the song of the nightingale without the big ache coming back to her heart.

She did not know that what she had lost was just a girlish illusion — the first peep into that land where love dwells, a land where everything is covered with glory, where every cloud is of a roseate hue and every song is a "Hosanna!" She had had just one little

peep through the curtains of life, and had seen just enough to guess how beautiful was that land of love. Now the curtains had fallen back with a swish, and she had drawn back, miserable and deceived.

All that night she lay back on her pillows, wide-eyed and wrapped in thought. She could not understand why she was so sad.

Her engagement to Lieutenant Carrington would only be a farce. She would only make it last for as long as Olive thought it desirable, for the sake of appearances, and to allay completely Sir Baldwin's suspicions. After that — Lieutenant Carrington being probably away on the Mediterranean with his ship — the mock engagement would be comfortably broken off without any fuss, and everything would be just as it had been before.

But Boadicea knew all the time that nothing would ever be again just as it had been before.

CHAPTER XVI

AN IMPERTINENT YOUNG MAN

After that there came for Boadicea many days of blank weariness, days when Aunt Caroline fussed round her, talking of trousseaux and a house in town, whilst Olive would scarcely say a kind word to her.

Lieutenant Carrington would call every afternoon at about five o'clock and stay to supper, and then ride away again at eight o'clock. During those two or three hours he would either sit in the museum talking to Uncle Jasper, or Olive would insist on his walking out with her in the orchard.

Boadicea would take her sewing into the museum, whilst Jack was there, and make an occasional remark when he addressed himself directly to her. But she did not join him and Olive when they walked together in the orchard. She had a great deal to do in the house helping Aunt Caroline with jams and pickle-making, and she really felt in the way when Olive and Jack were together.

She never knew what to talk about, especially when Olive was present, for then the conversation ran chiefly on town topics, the balls and receptions of the season, the health of the King, or bits of scandal about people whom she did not know. When Olive was not there it was a little easier, for Jack was interested in birds and their nests, and could tell her about tropical birds

which he had perceived in the distant lands which he had visited, and about nests which were good to eat.

In fact, it was when Lieutenant Carrington told her about the Chinese people eating birds' nests that she looked him straight in the face, being highly interested and very much amused, and that she saw his twinkling grey eyes fixed upon her in such a manner that the blood rushed up to her cheeks, and she was obliged to put her work down very suddenly, and to run out of the room on some paltry pretext.

She did not, of course, know how long this mock engagement was to last. Once she spoke about it to Olive, who said that a month would be quite sufficient, and that it would be best to wait until Lieutenant Carrington's leave was up and he went away on his ship in the first week of July. Olive declared then that the matter would be quite easy; no one, she said, disliked the present silly position more than Lieutenant Carrington, and he would arrange to break off the mock engagement quite easily from Malta. He would find some suitable pretext, and write the usual letter of regret.

At the back of Old Manor Farm, beyond the yard and all the barns, there was a small orchard, with a strawberry bed that sloped to the south, and was in full bearing long before any other strawberry bed in the whole of Thanet. Beyond the strawberry bed came the cherry and the plum trees, and these in spring were like a fairy garden. Now the cherries were ripe, and soon it would be the turn of the plums.

By the time that the plums were ripe Boadicea's engagement would have been a thing of the past, and by

the time that the apples were stored in the fruit-room she would no doubt have forgotten all about this weary, dreary time.

It was now the second day of July, and the very hottest weather that Thanet had experienced within memory of man. Fruit was very plentiful and very early, strawberries had been a glut in the market, and now cherries were threatening to be the same. It seemed hardly worth while picking, when cherries in Covent Garden Market only fetched twopence a pound.

But then Aunt Caroline cared nothing about Covent Garden Market, nor about the price of fruit. Cherries were ripe and plentiful and made excellent jam, and as Topcoat had to dig up some early potatoes, Boadicea had to gather cherries for jam.

She had been gathering for over an hour, and the weather was terribly hot. Aunt Caroline had said that tea would be in the orchard, and Susan had commenced operations in that direction by bringing a huge tray on which was laid out Aunt Caroline's best tea-service, the one with the tiny rosebuds dotted all over it, even over the inside of the cups.

A very large basket filled to the brim with cherries was deposited at the foot of the biggest cherry-tree in the orchard. It was a big grandfatherly kind of tree, with huge gnarled branches and a massive trunk which you could not span round with your two arms. Against this grandfatherly old tree was propped a ladder, and on the most solid branch of the tree with her back resting against the trunk sat Boadicea, reading a book.

She was very tired and very hot, for she had been on the top of the ladder for over an hour; the book was very interesting. It was called "The Last Days of Pompeii," and had just been published by Sir Edward Bulwer. Lieutenant Carrington had brought it one day for her, and she was deeply absorbed in the thrilling tale of love and adventure, and for the moment quite oblivious of the fact that to-morrow, the third of July, *H.M.S. Dolphin* would set sail for the Mediterranean, and her mock engagement to Lieutenant Carrington would then be virtually at an end.

She had really been counting the days ever since she had first known that Lieutenant Carrington would be leaving definitely on the third of the month. She had even reckoned that he would be in Thanet just long enough to taste Aunt Caroline's strawberry jam, and to hold the ladder whilst she, Boadicea, climbed up to gather the cherries. Now he had held the ladder for her to-day, Aunt Caroline was going to open the first of her pots of strawberry jam for tea, and Lieutenant Carrington was going away to-morrow for good.

Boadicea up in the fork of the cherry-tree was very busy forgetting all about Glaucus and Nydia, the blind girl, and the marble halls of Pompeii. She was also extremely busy in watching Lieutenant Carrington, who, in his turn, was very earnestly occupied in carrying Aunt Caroline's best china tea-service from the place where Susan had deposited it to another spot, immediately at the foot of the grandfatherly cherry tree on the branch of which perched Miss Boadicea.

He had arrived to-day a little earlier than usual, seeming very exhilarated, like a schoolboy who has

had an extra holiday allotted to him. The twinkle of merriment in his grey eyes had been more pronounced than it had been for a long time, a circumstance which Boadicea immediately attributed to his rejoicing at thought of his getting away from the anomalous position which — as Olive said — he so heartily disliked.

However, she had taken but very little notice of him, and soon left him talking with Olive in the museum, on the subject of Lady Something-or-Other's partiality for Captain Something-Else. That is to say, that Olive talked about Lady Something-or-Other, whilst Jack listened with apparent interest, and always with that bright twinkle in his eyes.

Boadicea had thus left them and went to gather cherries, until she was tired, when she took up her book which she had taken out with her, and settled herself in the branches of the cherry-tree.

Cousin Barnaby Crabtree, who wallowed in heat like a frowsy tom cat, usually took his afternoon siesta in the orchard, sitting at the foot of that same grandfatherly tree which sheltered Boadicea; he was sitting there now, with handkerchief over his head, snoring like one of those new steam engines which dragged carriages along between Stockton and Darlington.

It was, therefore, all the more remarkable why Lieutenant Carrington, the moment he came out into the orchard — which he did half an hour before tea time — should busy himself in placing Aunt Caroline's best china tea-set at the foot of this self-same tree.

However, Lieutenant Carrington and his doings were no concern of Boadicea's, and for quite a long while she watched him as he carefully disposed the

cups and saucers and the plates all round the foot of the tree, some quite close to Cousin Barnaby, who would be sure to knock the cups over if he stirred. At last curiosity got the better of indifference.

"Might I inquire, Lieutenant Carrington," she asked politely, "what you are doing?"

"As you see, Miss Aldmarshe," he replied with equal politeness, "I am disposing of your aunt's best china in a convenient place."

"I do not think it at all a convenient place," she said stiffly.

"Extremely convenient, Miss Aldmarshe, I assure you."

"For tea?"

"Exactly. For tea. The tree is shady, the ground flat around it. It is, indeed, a most convenient spot."

"But there is no cloth laid here for tea."

"True!" he said; "but I can soon remedy that."

And he turned back to where some few yards higher up Susan had originally deposited the tray, and from whence the gleam of a folded white cloth could be seen among the trees.

He went to fetch the cloth, and was back again with it in a few seconds. Then he once more busied himself with the china.

"Please don't tire yourself, Lieutenant Carrington," said Boadicea from above, "if you desire to have tea under this tree, we can, of course, have it here. But Susan can lay the cloth. She will be back directly. Please do not tire yourself doing her work."

"I feel no fatigue, I assure you."

But his work had become somewhat aimless. At

least so it appeared to Boadicea. He moved the cups, and the saucers and the plates from one place to another and back again, but he was not really attempting to lay the cloth for tea in a proper and methodical manner. It irritated her to see him fussing about like this, and yet he would not give up, in spite of what she said. And he seemed quite happy in his task, for his eyes twinkled with merriment every time they met hers.

"Why doesn't Susan come back?" she said, and sighed audibly with impatience.

"I wonder!" he said calmly, and went on rattling the cups and saucers.

"I told her to come back at once with the toast and bread and butter."

"And I told her just now not to let me see her face for at least ten minutes."

"Why should you have told her that?"

"For private reasons of my own."

"Then it was extremely foolish to give her such orders. And I doubt if she will obey them."

"Oh! she will obey them, I'll warrant. I took good care of that. I should call Susan a discriminating young female."

"And I should call you most impertinent for interfering with the orders which I gave to Susan."

Now, Boadicea must have been feeling very cross indeed, or she would not thus have departed from the customs of politeness prescribed by good breeding towards a gentleman who but a little while ago had been and who in another twenty-four hours would once more become a complete stranger.

But Lieutenant Carrington seemed totally unaware of the fact that he had offended Miss Aldmarshe, for he did not show that due sense of humility which her reproof should have called forth in him; on the contrary, he said quite imperturbably, and with consummate politeness:

"Miss Boadicea Aldmarshe, you are a marvellous judge of character: I am extremely impertinent."

"Then I pray you mend your ways!" she retorted.

"Not while you are perched on that tree."

"Why not?"

He came close to the foot of the ladder, and as it was leaning against the tree, so did he lean up against it, and his merry grey eyes were fixed on a point some three or four feet lower than Miss Boadicea's face.

"Because," he said, and she could see his lips, and could see that they twitched — not with shame or regret, I'll be bound —"because if I were not impertinent I would not dare to watch at this moment the daintiest pair of . . ."

"Lieutenant Carrington!" she broke in sternly.

And still he was neither rebuffed nor ashamed.

"If you wriggle about so much," he said, "you will surely fall."

And he actually mounted two rungs of the ladder.

"I wish to descend," she said stiffly; "I pray you stand aside."

But he did not stand aside. He so far misconstrued her commands that he mounted two further rungs of the ladder.

"I have not the remotest desire to stand aside," he said. "You don't know, perhaps, what a charming

picture you make perched up there among the cherries!"

"I wish Susan would come back!" retorted she, with a sigh.

"If she does, before I have told you something that is in my mind, I will either commit murder or . . ."

"Or what?"

By way of a reply, he mounted several further rungs of the ladder, until his head was just below the level of Boadicea's knees.

"On the whole," he said, looking boldly into her face, "I think that this is the wiser course."

"Lieutenant Carrington," she commanded, "I request you to descend."

"I will not descend until you have heard what I have got to say."

"There is nothing that you could say to me at this moment that would interest me."

And, very ostentatiously, she spread her book upon her knees, and began once more to read about Glaucus and Nydia, and the marble halls of Pompeii.

"Oh! I can wait!" said Lieutenant Carrington airily.

And he settled himself down on the top of the ladder, astride on the branch against which it rested, and leaned back his head against the trunk. He took off his hat and threw it down amongst the china cups and saucers. Then he actually began to whistle! — yes, whistle! and with Miss Aldmarshe bubbling over with wrath by his side.

"Very warm summer we are having," he said lightly.

"Very."

She was absorbed in her book, and he was absorbed in the contemplation of her. Never had she looked so pretty, not even to him, who had been feasting on her beauty these weeks past, whenever chance or her wilfulness allowed him to gaze upon her undisturbed. She had on a white muslin frock, and the strong afternoon sun striking through the leafy branches of the tree made patches of gold upon it, and caused blue shadows to nestle in the folds. Her soft brown hair was a little wild after the fruit-picking, and a very gentle breeze stirred the curly tendrils all round her head, making them shimmer and quiver in the intense brilliancy of the light.

Her face now was bent down to her book, and he could just see the still childish contour of cheek and chin, with the vivid red lips and the pearly shadows cast by the drooping lashes.

Pretty? My God! but she was pretty! and Lieutenant Carrington was no longer heart-whole. For days and weeks now she had filled his entire heart and mind and soul until he positively ached with the wild desire to fold her in his arms, to raise her chin up with his hand until her eyes looked straight into his; those eyes that were so true, so pure, so full of the knowledge of nature and of God, so ignorant of the world.

But up to now he had never dared speak to her of love. She seemed such a child that he almost feared to trust his happiness to words that might scare her, that might not reach her soul. For days and weeks he had waited patiently for the tiny, almost imperceptible sign that would tell him that he might speak. Her

blush the other day when he was talking about Chinese birds' nests, her confusion when some of his worshipful admiration had on that occasion spoken mutely through his eyes, her quaint stiffness when first she met him again after that episode, and her subsequent avoidance of him was the first of encouragement which he had received.

With it had come hope, and to-day Chance had played into his hands. Lady Jeffreys had a bad headache and had gone to her room for half an hour's rest before tea, and Boadicea was alone perched like a wood-nymph in the branches of a tree.

The orchard was silent, too, in the heat of this afternoon; the buzz of bumble bees alone disturbed the peaceful stillness around. Lieutenant Carrington was lost in a dream from which he was suddenly awakened by a loud and prolonged snore which came from below.

Boadicea, too, was startled, and nearly dropped her book, which would have been calamitous to Aunt Caroline's best china tea-service.

"Mr. Crabtree makes a pretty picture down there, does he not?" said Jack Carrington, in an easy conversational tone.

"Lieutenant Carrington," she rejoined impatiently, "did you hear me remark that I wished to descend?"

"I did hear you make that observation, Miss Aldmarshe," he replied.

"Yet you have made no attempt at letting me pass."

"The attempt would be beyond my humble capacities."

"I wish to use that ladder, Lieutenant Carrington."

"It is at your service, Miss Aldmarshe, if you will put that book aside and listen to me quietly for ten minutes."

"That were beyond my humble capacities!" she retorted.

"In that case, I fear me that the ladder will remain inaccessible to the prettiest little feet in England."

"Then I'll jump!" she said resolutely, and turning her back on him and on the ladder.

But with a comical air of reproach, he pointed downwards to his own elaborate arrangement of tea-cups and saucers round the foot of the tree.

"What!" he exclaimed —"on Aunt Caroline's best china? . . . or into Mr. Crabtree's lap — which?"

"I think you are odious!" she said.

"Absolutely odious!" he assented. "Hadn't you better listen to what I have to say?"

"I cannot! You are sure to talk nonsense, and Cousin Barnaby hates to hear nonsense talked."

Whereupon Cousin Barnaby gave forth a mighty snore.

"'Out of their own mouths thine enemies confound thee'!" quoted Jack, triumphantly; "and out of my mouth only wisdom shall come, I promise you."

"Another time!" urged Boadicea.

"There never is another time. You make a point of never being alone with me."

"I do not see that there is any occasion for you to see me alone."

"But I go away to-morrow."

"I know that. All the more reason why we should not see too much of one another to-day. The less we

are together, the easier it will be to carry on this foolish pretence another twenty-four hours."

"Foolish pretence?" he asked.

"Indeed, what else is it?"

"A serious engagement."

"Pshaw!" and she tried by the expression in her face to show him all the contempt which she felt for that so-called engagement.

"I asked you in the presence of several witnesses," he persisted, "for the honour of your hand in marriage, and in the presence of several witnesses you accepted me as your future husband."

"You know quite well, Lieutenant Carrington, that you only asked me, and I only accepted as you say, in order to save Olive from Sir Baldwin's unreasoning jealousy. We are going through the pretence of an engagement to save appearances; and you will, of course, be glad when that pretence no longer binds you. As we are going to break off this mock engagement in a few days, there is no cause to hold conversations about it."

"There is every cause for me to tell you some time during the next few hours exactly how pretty you are."

"Your original estimate of me was that I was a young savage."

"That was a long time ago."

"One month ago exactly, to the day."

"Is it as long? Well, since then many things have changed."

"Including your estimate of me?" she asked ironically.

"No! Not that"

"You've not come to the conclusion that I am not a savage?"

"No. I've merely discovered that there's nothing in the world so fascinating as a young savage."

Again that look in his eyes; they did not only twinkle, they glowed, and — worse still — they caused her cheeks to glow. She would have given worlds to be able to run away; but he had possession of the ladder, and Aunt Caroline's best china was down below.

"Ah!" she exclaimed suddenly; "there's someone coming at last."

"The devil!" he retorted.

"And Cousin Barnaby is awake!" she added triumphantly.

This was true. Cousin Barnaby even at this moment was heard to yawn, and was seen to remove the handkerchief from the top of his head.

I am afraid that this time Jack emphatically said: "Damn!"

"Kindly allow me to descend," resumed Boadicea quietly.

He made pretence to be making way for her.

"On one condition," he said.

"What is it?"

"That you give me ten minutes' private interview in this orchard some time this afternoon."

"There's no necessity," she said firmly.

"Very well."

And once more he installed himself on the top of the ladder as if he had no intention of stirring from that uncomfortable position.

Tears of vexation rose to Boadicea's eyes.

"Olive is coming this way!" she pleaded.

"Ten minutes!" he pronounced resolutely.

"Oh, very well!"

The citadel had capitulated. Lieutenant Carrington began descending the ladder, whilst Boadicea watched him impatiently. Midway down the ladder he paused:

"Alone," he said.

"If you insist."

"I insist. You promise?"

"I . . . oh! here's Olive!"

"You promise?"

"I promise. There!"

CHAPTER XVII

A MAN IN LOVE

OLIVE came walking down the orchard in her prettiest afternoon gown, and with a rose-coloured sunshade held above her head.

She was looking her best just now and she knew it, and when a woman knows that she is pretty, that knowledge makes her a thousand times prettier than before. Lieutenant Carrington was going away tomorrow; he would be absent some months, during which time that silly mock engagement with Boadicea would be broken off, and on his return Lady Jeffreys could resume with him that pleasing flirtation, that agreeable toying with the flames of passion, which was her idea of supreme enjoyment in life.

But to-day being the last which Lieutenant Jack would spend in her company for many months to come, it would have to be one fraught with many delights, with graciousness tempered with a measure of coquetry, just sufficient to leave in its trail a happy memory of the past, and an exciting longing for the future.

Therefore she had put on her most becoming gown, and retired to her room during the hottest part of the day so that she should appear fresh as spring blossom to dazzle Jack's eyes at tea time.

She thought to find him alone in the orchard lan-

guishing for her company, and listening with bored attention to Boadicea's few remarks. In her mind she had apprised the young couple's attitude to one another, entirely to her own satisfaction. On the part of Boadicea there was just childish ignorance of the world, a total want of knowledge of the art how to captivate and hold a man. She may originally have been flattered by Lieutenant Carrington's notice of her, but seeing him tired and bored, as he undoubtedly was in her presence, she must very quickly have given up all thoughts of trying to please him.

As for Lieutenant Jack, why, of course, his attitude was plain enough to the eyes of the lady who desired to keep him dangling round her skirts. He looked upon Boadicea with eyes of contemptuous pity. How could he fail to do so, seeing that he must for ever be comparing her with her beautiful and fascinating sister.

Having thus disposed of the feelings of two young people Lady Jeffreys felt herself at liberty to give free rein to her own. She liked Lieutenant Jack. He was good looking, and had distinguished himself above the herd of idle young men about town. There was a certain amount of social glory to be derived from having a temporary society lion dallying round her skirts; moreover, it continued to vex Sir Baldwin Jeffreys, who — heartily ashamed of his violent outburst of jealousy — had not put in an appearance at Old Manor Farm since then.

Olive — thinking to find Lieutenant Jack listless and bored in her absence — was very disagreeably surprised when she saw him standing at the bottom of a

ladder watching with unmistakable attention Boadicea's descent from a cherry tree. So absorbed did he seem in the contemplation of a pair of ankles encased in white cotton stockings that he did not even perceive the swish of silk skirts on the grass, nor the affected little cough which should have told him that a very beautiful lady was close by.

Olive frowned. She was not pleased with the picture, which in itself would have delighted the eye of any artist or dreamer or poet who happened to revel in brilliant sunshine and dense blue shadows, in wild brown hair on which the afternoon light threw gleams of ruddy gold, in youth and grace, and that subtle aroma of delight which emanates from young people who are in love, and do not yet know the full meaning of the passion.

Still frowning, Olive approached the grandfatherly cherry-tree, at the foot of which Barnaby Crabtree was just awakening from his midday slumber.

"Child," said Lady Jeffreys through pursed lips, "what are you doing here?"

She was still talking from some little distance, and no doubt that was the reason why her high-pitched soprano voice sounded shrill and out of tune on this exquisitely harmonious afternoon.

"I thought," she added, "that aunt had deputed you to set the china straight."

Boadicea was a little confused, as well she might be, seeing that Olive was angered with her, and Lieutenant Carrington's searching grey eyes seemed brimming over with amusement.

"I . . ." she stammered, "that is . . . we . . .

Lieutenant Carrington and I . . . did busy ourselves in . . ."

"Looking for begad caterpillars on a tree-top, I suppose!" muttered Cousin Barnaby irritably.

Olive was surveying Aunt Caroline's best china tea-set with frowning eyes.

"You had better busy yourself to better purpose now," she said. "Lieutenant Carrington, please! — a branch of thorn has caught the hem of my gown. Might I trouble you to disentangle it?"

"At your service, Lady Jeffreys."

And Boadicea had the mortification to see with what alacrity he ran to do Olive's bidding, leaving her to struggle with the china, which he himself had so clumsily ranged round the foot of the cherry-tree. He knelt at Olive's feet and busied himself laboriously — and very lengthily, she thought — with the bit of bramble that was tearing a filmy lace flounce, whilst Olive was looking down on him, smiling and quite good-humoured now.

Obviously the disentangling of a bit of thorn from a silk gown could not last an indefinite length of time. Boadicea was watching the process through the corners of her eyes, which caused her once or twice to stumble against Cousin Barnaby's outstretched legs, whereupon he said something very rude under his breath.

"Child," said Olive after a while in that high-pitched tone which she usually affected. "I can see aunt coming from the house with a pile of cakes and Susan behind her, more clumsy than a cow. Had you not best go to her?"

"Allow me to go," said Lieutenant Carrington, rising to his knees with truly marvellous alacrity, considering the pleasing occupation in which he had just been engaged.

"Ah, Lieutenant Carrington!" pleaded Olive, with captivating grace, "please do not vote me a nuisance, but the string of my shoe has come undone, and I cannot fasten it myself without grave discomfort."

Jack looked undecided. On the one hand he did not want Boadicea to go away from him at this moment, or at any other when he could persuade her to remain close by, and on the other he could not with politeness refuse to render a lady the service of tying up her shoe. Boadicea, trying to conceal her vexation under a mask of indifference, decided the point for him.

"I pray you, Lieutenant Carrington," she said in a high-pitched, affected tone of voice like that of her sister, "attend to Lady Jeffreys' shoe-string. I have business elsewhere."

And before Jack could make a movement to stop her, she had darted away like some elfish creature of woods and orchards, her muslin gown flying out behind her, her brown hair gleaming in the sun.

"Jack!" whispered Lady Jeffreys tenderly.

He knelt down once more and busied himself with her shoe, whilst Cousin Barnaby murmured rude things in the rear.

When he had finished tying the shoe, he rose to his feet, and she took his arm with easy familiarity and led him away among the cherry-trees. He went quite submissively, for indeed his thoughts were not here at all: they were following the graceful fairy-like figure

that had run away from him just now, and his mind was busy recalling every line that had enchanted him while she ran, dwelling on the memory of her as she sat there in the cherry-tree with the sunshine playing on her hair, the soft blush mantling on her downy cheek. . . .

And Olive went rambling on, talking of Lady Medenham's rout, and of the Queen's latest whim in bonnets. He listened without hearing, and gave answers without heeding, thankful that Lady Jeffreys was too absorbed in her own charming personality to notice his absent gaze and his crooked remarks; apparently she had succeeded in persuading herself that he was so filled with sorrow at his coming departure from her side that he had no heart for society small talk.

He did not mind walking round the orchard like this, and indeed, the beautiful Lady Jeffreys hardly existed for him. He was living through that halcyon time that only comes once in life — and not in every life — the halcyon time of newly awakened love, when every blade of grass whispers of one foot, and every bird throat sings the praise of one divinity.

Whilst Jack Carrington wandered round the orchard with Olive he saw Boadicea at every turn and behind every tree, her voice spoke to him through that of the thrush, her brown hair glittered for him in every ray of sunshine.

And now Aunt Caroline really came bustling out with a tray in her hands on which were laid plates filled with cakes, bread and butter, and all manner of things to eat. She was scolding Susan as hard as she could

go, her tongue and her feet going along at an equally quick rate.

"Lord bless my soul, did anyone ever see the like? Truly servants were specially invented by Providence to plague us. There is nothing this girl does that I could not do a thousand times better than she, or a thousand times quicker. Susan! Susan! where in the name of common-sense are you?"

And Susan, who was following very closely on her mistress's heels with another tray on which were set the tea-pot, milk and cream jugs, and other appurtenances of the homely brew, said pertly:

"Here, ma'am."

"Bustle up, then! bustle up!" admonished Aunt Caroline. "The tea should have been here long ago."

"It is half an hour late," said Cousin Barnaby, who made no attempt to give a hand in the laying-out of the picnic tea.

Aunt Caroline and Susan were very busy for the next five minutes in setting out the best china tea-service, and making arrangements for the comfort of everyone else.

"There! that will do," said Aunt Caroline, when all had been arranged to her satisfaction. "Run and find your master now, Susan."

"Yes, ma'am. Master was in the orchard just now."

"Well! and did you tell him that tea was ready?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Did he say he was coming?"

"He said something like mixed biscuits, ma'am!"

"Mixed biscuits?"

"Some of his confounded Latin, I suppose!" concluded Cousin Barnaby, with a grunt.

But even at this moment Uncle Jasper was coming along. He had his coat on with the brass buttons, and the wig with the full curls over the temples, a specimen case made of shining brass was slung round his shoulders by a strap, and he had his butterfly-net in his hand, showing that he had not spent an idle afternoon.

"Qui utile dulci miscuit," he said, when he saw the tea-things so temptingly laid out in the shade of the cherry-tree on the grass.

"Mixed biscuits!" commented Cousin Barnaby drily.

"'Who mixes the agreeable with the useful,' is the correct translation from the Latin adage, Barnaby," said Uncle Jasper blandly.

Though he saw the tea laid out before him, and Aunt Caroline raising the heavy tea-pot preparatory to pouring out, he said, with his usual vagueness:

"Tea did you say, my dear?"

"Why, of course, tea, Jasper!" said Aunt Caroline impatiently; "didn't you hear me say at dinner time that we would have tea in the orchard to-day?"

"A most inconvenient spot!" remarked Cousin Barnaby.

He was stuffing the corner of a napkin into the opening of his collar. Already he had taken possession of the most shady and most comfortable seat at the improvised tea-table, with his back against the trunk of the tree, and his favourite cakes and scones disposed conveniently to his hand.

"I hate meals out-of-doors," he said, "like a begad earwig!"

"But in beautiful weather like this, Cousin Barnaby," retorted Aunt Caroline, "it would be a sin to remain indoors!"

Lady Jeffreys and Lieutenant Carrington were now seen walking among the trees. They were hailed by Aunt Caroline, and soon joined the party at tea. Olive looked prettier than ever, for her cheeks were aglow with pleasure. She had thoroughly enjoyed her walk, and comfortably attributed Jack's abstraction to sorrow at parting from her.

CHAPTER XVIII

A WOMAN IN A RAGE

AUNT CAROLINE was already busy pouring out tea. She was excessively hot, because she thought it right and proper to put on her silk dress every time Lieutenant Carrington paid an afternoon visit at Old Manor Farm.

"Olive, dear, where will you sit?" she asked, seeing that the two newcomers — both for reasons of their own — were standing by, irresolutely, before joining in the circle on the grass.

"On a clean pocket-handkerchief, Aunt, if there is one," replied Olive, with a supercilious lift of her arched eyebrows.

"Come, Susan, bustle up, then, bustle up!" said Aunt Caroline fussily, "a clean handkerchief for her ladyship. . . . Lord! bless my soul! how stupid these girls are nowadays."

Which obviously was a very unfair accusation against Susan just at this moment, for how in the world was a girl to find a clean pocket-handkerchief in the middle of an orchard? Mr. Crabtree had one in his pocket, and the corner of it protruded under the flap; Susan did try to obey her mistress and incidentally to show her cleverness by seizing the corner of that handkerchief, whereupon, of course, Mr. Crabtree was very angry.

"Don't do that!" he cried. "Am I a begad laundry?"

This made everyone laugh, and it also gave Lieutenant Carrington the very opportunity which he had longed for.

"Will you allow me, Lady Jeffreys?" he said, and turned toward the house.

"What to do?" she said.

"Find a handkerchief for you."

"But . . . " she protested.

But it was too late to protest. Lieutenant Jack was already half way to the house.

"So attentive, Lieutenant Carrington," said Aunt Caroline placidly. "His manners are quite irreproachable."

"A foolish thought to run after a handkerchief!" said Olive stiffly; "I had one by me, after all."

She felt suddenly out of temper; quite unaccountably so, surely, for Jack had hurried off in her service. But she would have been more pleased had Boadicea been in the orchard at the present moment, instead of in the house, where she certainly would be meeting Lieutenant Carrington.

Aunt Caroline was handing Barnaby Crabtree his second cup of tea. He gave a grunt of satisfaction.

"Let us be thankful for small mercies!"

"How so?" questioned Olive.

"To have a meal in comparative peace."

"Surely, Cousin Barnaby," she said, "you find the country peaceful, this beautiful midsummer time?"

"I might, ma'am, if it were not for that begad lovemaking!"

"Love-making?"

"Aye! No sooner have Caroline's confounded guinea-fowls ceased their abominable screeching, being, I suppose, busy with their food, and I have settled down at last to a few moments' quiet rest in the heat of the afternoon, than I am disturbed . . . disgracefully, unwarrantly disturbed!"

"But how, Cousin Barnaby!" exclaimed Aunt Caroline. "I thought that in the afternoon both the house and the orchard were particularly quiet and peaceful."

"Ah!" he retorted crossly, "you thought, then, that it was quiet and peaceful for me yesterday afternoon to be aroused from my gentle meditations by sickly sounds of 'Meadowsweet! Meadowsweet!'" — and he mimicked the sentimental voice of a young man who might be in love. "'My little Meadowsweet, come out!' Ugh! disgusting, I call it."

"You were dreaming, Cousin Barnaby," said Olive, whose irritation and ill-temper were perceptibly growing.

"Dreaming? eh? And was I dreaming just now when those two young jackanapes were perching on that tree-top talking of ankles like two begad idiots?"

"I don't know whom you mean, Cousin Barnaby," she rejoined. "Who is Meadowsweet, and who are the two jackanapes to whom you refer?"

"I am talking of your sister, ma'am, and of that begad sailor."

"Then you are talking nonsense, Cousin Barnaby. I am sure that Lieutenant Carrington is most moderate

in his courtship. Anyone can see that he is not in the least in love."

"Anyone can see that he is a fool."

"Omnis amans, amens!" murmured Uncle Jasper.

"Jasper used to be the only insane person in this house," said Mr. Crabtree blandly; "but now, ma'am, your sister and her sailor are two begad lunatics."

"I feel sure you exaggerate, Cousin Barnaby!" retorted Olive, who by now had great difficulty in concealing her irritation.

"I feel sure," he rejoined placidly, "that I shall get a bad bilious attack if this begad cooing and billing is allowed to go on."

But this was more than any woman could stand. Olive jumped up from the tea-table, for she felt that if she stood still any longer listening to all this vapid talk she would surely have an attack of hysteria.

"Did a wasp sting you?" queried Barnaby Crabtree blandly.

"Yes," she replied viciously.

"You have spilt your tea, ma'am, and upset my peaceful enjoyment of this repast."

Olive now was walking up and down on the grass in a state of great agitation. Aunt Caroline, at the bare suggestion of a wasp sting, had come forward with all manner of remedies — milk, salt, soil made into a messy pap with water and sugar — and was mortally offended because Olive would have none of these things applied to the imaginary sting.

"No, no, Aunt, let me be!" said Olive irritably, "for gracious' sake, don't fuss! You'll get on my nerves if you fidget round me like this."

"I don't believe that it was a wasp, after all," said Aunt Caroline; "perhaps it was only a gnat."

"Yes! that's it, Aunt," rejoined Olive, with a harsh little laugh; "it was only a poisonous little gnat!"

"Won't you come and finish your tea, then?"

Was ever woman so plagued before? Olive would gladly have indulged in a screaming fit; she felt that it would have eased the tension of her nerves. As it was, the bland platitudes of Aunt Caroline and the venomous shafts of Cousin Barnaby were equally driving her to desperation.

"As for me," said Mr. Crabtree, who was contentedly eating plum cake, "I came here for peace. This afternoon I settled down in this orchard for peace. Love-making is disturbing at all times, especially on a warm afternoon. And now I come to think of it, Caroline, I'll go indoors directly after tea, ere I get more of it."

"More of it!" exclaimed Olive.

Mr. Crabtree once more mimicked the voice of some young man supposed to be sick with love.

"'Ten minutes with you — alone — to-day!' Bah!!! It makes me sick!"

"I'll not allow it!" cried out Olive impulsively, forgetting all prudence in this sudden access of jealousy. "I'll not allow it!"

"And why not, Olive?" queried Aunt Caroline. "Indeed, I think Cousin Barnaby's remarks most unseemly. As for me, I like to see two young people in love. Lord bless my soul! it reminds me of the days when your uncle came courting me!"

"Did he come along with a butterfly-net?" asked

Mr. Crabtree, glancing at Uncle Jasper, who, indeed, had finished his tea, and was hovering about behind a cherry-tree, butterfly-net in hand, intent on the gyrations of a magnificent butterfly which seemed to have strayed from the flower-garden.

"Jasper was better-looking than you ever were, Barnaby," said Aunt Caroline hotly.

"Then you think, Aunt," interposed Olive, who now tried to speak more gaily and unconcernedly, "you think that Lieutenant Carrington has fallen in love with Boadicea?"

"I am sure of it," replied Aunt Caroline. "At first I thought that he seemed rather cold towards her."

"No wonder. Since she inveigled him into this engagement," assented Olive spitefully.

"Her conduct that evening was certainly unmaidenly," conceded Aunt Caroline. "I think that she must have fallen in love with him at first sight, and that she — being very young — did not know how to conceal her feelings towards him. He, on the other hand, was at first only flattered."

"Flattered!" ejaculated Olive under her breath, "at the attentions of a pert country minx. I should have thought that they would have disgusted him."

"Not a bit of it, my dear. Men are like wasps. Honey will always attract them . . . the honey of soft speeches and pretty glances. He may have been cold at first, but now things are altogether reversed."

"How so?"

"'Tis Boadicea who holds aloof, whilst Lieutenant Carrington is as keen as a fly after jam."

"Ugh!!" grunted Mr. Crabtree.

"Then, 'tis for you, Aunt, to put an end to this ridiculous engagement!" exclaimed Olive excitedly.

"I wish she could!" said Cousin Barnaby.

"Ridiculous engagement!"—and Aunt Caroline's hands went up in token of supreme astonishment. "Why, it will be the joy of my life to see the child married to Mamie Carrington's boy! She was my dearest friend. He is rich, well-favoured, a perfect gentleman. . . ."

"I call the whole thing unseemly, silly, senseless!" cried Olive hotly. "She is far too young, too stupid . . . she is nothing better than an uneducated schoolgirl, quite unfit to go into society . . . or to the altar, for a matter of that . . . I call it wicked to allow such an engagement to go on."

"But, my dear, at the time . . ."

"At the time we all had to save the child's reputation, which she had so gravely compromised by her immodest conduct. Lieutenant Carrington behaved just as a gentleman should, and averted the scandal which would for ever have disgraced us all. But he had no intention to entangle himself in the meshes of an engagement with a girl for whom he could have nothing but contempt, and for his sake — since he behaved so nobly at the time — that senseless engagement must be put an end to at once!"

"But, my dear," protested Aunt Caroline meekly, for Olive was waxing very vehement, and Aunt Caroline was greatly afraid of her niece's tantrums, "believe my old experience! I don't believe that either of those two young people would wish to break the engagement off now!"

"Then you should interfere, Aunt!" cried Olive, completely losing control over her nerves, and shrieking at the top of her voice like some virago in a rage. "Someone ought to interfere — the whole thing is monstrous, infamous, silly and wicked! I'll not allow it . . . I won't . . . I wont!"

"Olive!" exclaimed Aunt Caroline in astonishment, "what in the world is the matter? . . . I've never seen you like this. . . ."

"Most disturbing!" muttered Cousin Barnaby.

Aunt Caroline's exclamation of astonishment had recalled Olive to herself. She had a sufficiency of common-sense and also of conceit not to wish to expose her feelings before her aunt and this disagreeable, mischief-making old man. Her jealousy had rendered her not only spiteful, but careless of appearances; and appearances were the beginning and end of Olive's rule of conduct. So, seeing her aunt's round eyes fixed in amazement upon her, she pulled herself together resolutely, and said, with a quick, anxious little laugh:

"Oh! . . . I . . . I beg your pardon, Aunt. . . . I must have been dreaming . . ."

"Funny dreams!" muttered Cousin Barnaby.

"It is so hot — and the flies are so upsetting," continued Lady Jeffreys. "I was disturbed. . . ."

"So was I, gravely disturbed."

"I think it must have been the heat . . . and Cousin Barnaby's silly remarks.. . . Please, Aunt, excuse me! . . . I think I'll go and lie down for a while. Boadicea shall bathe my head with vinegar and water. . . . Cousin Barnaby was too funny . . . mimicking a love-sick youth . . . Cousin Barnaby, I

suspect you of being in love yourself, the pretty way you said 'Meadowsweet! my little Meadowsweet!' . . . I thought I should have died with laughter. . . . What time is supper to-night, Aunt? — as usual, I suppose. . . . I don't think that I'll come down before then . . . my headache will be better by that time, if I keep quiet. So long, Cousin Barnaby. . . . I hope you'll enjoy your fourth cup of tea . . . undisturbed."

She was laughing hysterically, whilst short, sharp sobs shook her throat and brought tears of anger to her eyes.

"Shall I come with you, Olive?" asked Aunt Caroline, feeling very concerned at this strange outburst of rage, which she was too simple to understand.

"No, no, Aunt, thank you! I shall find Boadicea indoors, shall I not? In the arms of Lieutenant Carrington probably? Really, Aunt, I think you might watch a little more carefully over the child. With her disregard of conventionalities, she might yet bring lasting disgrace upon us all."

With this parting shaft aimed at poor, unsophisticated Aunt Caroline, Lady Jeffreys gathered up her flounced skirts and, interposing her sunshade between herself and Cousin Barnaby's rude stare, she walked rapidly away in the direction of the house.

"At last we may indulge in a little peace," said Mr. Crabtree calmly, as soon as Olive's pretty figure had vanished in the distance. "Caroline, both your nieces are a disturbing element in this household. You will have to rid yourself of them."

"I wonder now what was the matter with Olive," mused Aunt Caroline thoughtfully.

"Her liver probably. Most disturbances can be ascribed to the liver. Caroline," he added, handing over his cup for refilling, "this tea has become cold. I'll partake of another more palatable cup — and this time, I hope, in peace."

And he did finish his tea in peace, even though a few moments later Lieutenant Carrington came down from the house, and after a few polite words of excuse sat down and had his tea in silence. Aunt Caroline asked after Boadicea. But Lieutenant Carrington said that he had sought for her in vain for a long while, and only caught sight of her a moment ago, when she was running upstairs in response to a peremptory call from Lady Jeffreys.

Whereupon Aunt Caroline was greatly upset that the child should be missing her tea.

CHAPTER XIX

AN UNSEEMLY INCIDENT

I DON'T know whether Aunt Caroline actually suggested that Boadicea should go out into the orchard and see if that silly girl Susan had left one of the best silver spoons behind, or whether Aunt Caroline did no such thing, and the suggestion came from Boadicea.

This I do know, that about an hour later, when the tea-things had been washed up and Aunt Caroline had as usual gone to the museum for the express purpose of worrying Uncle Jasper in the intervals of darning his socks, Boadicea did go into the orchard to see if Susan had left one of the best silver spoons on the grass.

Now Susan had done no such thing, and the orchard at this hour was quite peaceful and deserted. The birds were gathering up the crumbs which had fallen from the merrymakers' table, and except for the fact that the grass around the foot of the grandfatherly cherry-tree was trodden down and limp from the impress of the recent tea-party, there was no sign that the peace of this midsummer's afternoon had ever been disturbed.

The tea-party had, as a matter of fact, come to an abrupt and somewhat unseemly ending, which circumstance it is my duty to chronicle, seeing that it will more fully explain the reason why the orchard gener-

ally and the neighbourhood of the grandfatherly cherry-tree most particularly were quite so deserted at this early hour of the day.

Aunt Caroline and Lieutenant Carrington were conversing politely on indifferent topics, such as the weather, and the prospects of the apple crop, whilst Mr. Crabtree partook of a copious meal, which included all the muffins and most of the cake which had been intended for the rest of the party. Strangely enough, Aunt Caroline, by some intuition which she herself could not have explained, refrained from mentioning either Olive's or Boadicea's name; this reticence was all the more remarkable as she must have felt worried at the thought that both were missing their tea.

To miss a meal was in Aunt Caroline's opinion the most blameworthy act on the part of any well-regulated constitution, and it was therefore greatly to her credit that tact and discretion got the better of her usual fussiness. I think that Lieutenant Carrington would have liked to talk about Boadicea just then; there are strange and subtle wishes in the heart when love holds its full sway in it, curious reticences, and unaccountable timidities, which are very delicious to experience, for Love creates them, and the sensations that Love creates have all a foretaste of heaven. So Lieutenant Carrington was quite content to sit quietly beneath the cherry-tree and to listen to Aunt Caroline's mild efforts at conversation, for his memory held the promise which Boadicea had given him, to meet him in the orchard — alone — presently and to listen to

what he had to say, and his heart was feeding on the delights of anticipation.

During this time, Susan, sitting at a respectful distance from her betters, was consuming everything that Aunt Caroline had set aside for her, the outside pieces of the cake and the middle pieces of the muffin, which Cousin Barnaby did not care about; and Uncle Jasper was stalking a beautiful large butterfly with his net.

As luck would have it, the butterfly settled for one moment on the top of Mr. Crabtree's bald head, and unfortunately Uncle Jasper, being very short-sighted as well as very enthusiastic in the pursuit of science, brought his net down somewhat suddenly over the butterfly and Mr. Crabtree's head.

The immediate result was only what could be expected. The cup full of tea, which Mr. Crabtree was about to convey to his lips, fell from his hand, the tea was spilt all over Aunt Caroline's best table-cloth and drowned the remainder of an excellent plum-cake which, after such an immersion, would be wholly unfit to eat, and of course Cousin Barnaby swore profusely.

"Thunder and flame! . . . what the . . . why the . . ."

"Jasper, how could you?" exclaimed Aunt Caroline, horrified.

Then she loudly called to Susan, who, I am sorry to say, was rolling over in the grass, at a respectful distance, of course, holding her sides with laughter.

"Susan! Susan! Lord bless my soul, where's that girl now! Susan!"

"Yes, ma'am!" Susan contrived to say, after she

had stuffed her mouth full of muffin to choke back the immoderate laughter.

And while Aunt Caroline fussed round Cousin Barnaby with a serviette, and Susan tried to rescue the bread and butter from the flood of tea, Uncle Jasper said reproachfully:

"You have scared him away, Barnaby! A beautiful Red Admiral!"

"On my head?" roared Mr. Crabtree, whose indignation was at its height. "On my head? . . . Jasper, I ask you, am I a begad geranium?"

"Aliusque et idem," murmured Uncle Jasper placidly; "another yet the same."

And not waiting to hear further abuse from irate Cousin Barnaby, he calmly continued to stalk the Red Admiral. Presently he caught it, and carried it off in triumph to the museum, whilst Mr. Crabtree muttered indignantly:

"I shall have to change my pantaloons!"

"Aye, aye, come with me, Cousin Barnaby!" said Aunt Caroline in a kindly spirit of conciliation. "Take no heed of Jasper; he meant no harm."

"He ought to be in a lunatic asylum!"

He kindly allowed Aunt Caroline to lead him away from the scene of this outrageous catastrophe, whilst Susan, busy clearing away the mess, muttered under her breath:

"If we all was . . ."

"Stop muttering!" said Mr. Crabtree, who was still very cross. "I hate muttering . . . What did you say, girl?"

But Susan now was dumb. She bent her head

down to the tea-things, pretending to be very absorbed in her work. She waited until Mr. Crabtree and Aunt Caroline were well out of earshot, then she said as loudly as she dared, nodding her head in the direction of the dyspeptic old man:

"What I say is, some of us ought to be in a wild beast show!"

After which exclamation she felt that her feelings had been relieved. She concluded her own tea in peace and then set to to clear away all the tea-things, and honestly I do not think that she left any silver spoon on the grass.

And yet, an hour later, Boadicea declared to Aunt Caroline that one of the spoons was missing and that she was quite sure she would find it in the long grass under the cherry-tree where the tea had been laid out, which I must tell you was not at all unlikely, seeing that that spoon was at this moment quietly reposing in Boadicea's pocket, and that as she went straight away and put it in the long grass under the cherry-tree, she would surely find it there again after a ten minutes' search.

All of which of course is most reprehensible; nor did the manœuvre deceive Aunt Caroline, who had counted the spoons over before they were washed up, and knew that they were all together then, and who had, moreover, taken special note of the fact that Lieutenant Carrington was nowhere about the house and was most probably in the orchard at this moment, waiting for that spoon to be discovered in the long grass under the cherry-tree.

CHAPTER XX

A FAIRY TALE

Six o'clock in the afternoon at the beginning of July is one of the most exquisite moments in an English orchard, when the shadows are beginning to lengthen, and the rays of the sun come slanting through the network of boughs, and on the west side every leaf on every damson or cherry tree is a tiny mirror that reflects the glory of the sky.

In the shadow of the house there was a bed of white tobacco in full bloom, and just at this hour the sweet pungent scent filled the orchard from end to end, and lazy bumble bees hovered above the waxen flowers and gave forth that dull, quaint sound of buzzing and droning which is so soothing and so suggestive of peace.

Boadicea walked towards the orchard from the house. She was hatless, and her brown hair, ever inclined to unruliness, escaped all round her head from the trammels of a big black satin bow which attempted to fetter it at the nape of her neck. Close by the bed of tobaccos she paused a moment, and drew one long breath, drinking in with both nostrils the delicious, almost intoxicating fragrance of the flowers.

She could see no one in the orchard for the moment, and she was glad of this respite, for her heart was beating furiously; she really could not have told you

why. She turned her steps toward the grandfatherly cherry-tree, and the next moment two strong arms encircled her from behind, and she had the greatest possible difficulty in extricating herself from these insistent bonds.

"How dare you?" she exclaimed as soon as she was free again, and stood facing the bold assailant, who, with glowing eyes, was looking into her own.

"I wonder how I dare," he replied, unabashed.

"I was looking for aunt," she said stiffly. But she made no attempt to move away.

"Oh, no!" he said quite seriously. "Surely for old Crabtree?"

And that light of merriment twinkled impertinently in his grey eyes.

"I'll go and find aunt elsewhere," she rejoined loftily, and walked further into the orchard in the direction of the cherry-tree.

"I swear to you that you shall not!" he said.

And he walked quicker than she did, and was the first to reach the tree. There he stopped, and threw himself down on the grass in the long cool shadow, and whilst she said haughtily: "Indeed?" he looked on her approaching figure with eyes that literally drank in every graceful line, from the exquisitely poised little head, with the brown hair gleaming like gold in the sunshine, down to the small feet that trod the ground so firmly.

"You are going to stay here for ten minutes — alone with me — as you promised," he said.

And his eyes invited her to sit beside him on the cool grass, and, believe me, that when presently she did

so, putting on a quaint air of resignation and of disdain which the soft blush in her cheeks disclaimed, he had to clasp his hands tightly together, pressing his nails into his flesh, in an endeavour to repress that overmastering desire to seize her then and there in his arms and to press her closely to him, whilst his lips sought the delicious fragrance of her hair, her eyes, her lips.

"Ah, yes! I promised!" she said, with whimsical affectation. "Well, then, you must be brief. . . ."

Then as he said nothing, but continued to look on her with an ardent gaze that sent the hot blood rushing up to her cheek, she said impatiently:

"Well! why don't you begin? I can only give you ten minutes, you know."

He saw the blush in her cheek, and wondered how much of it came from girlish coquetry and how much from ignorance of what his glance had desired to convey. Now that he had her so near to him, so thoroughly at the mercy of the passionate appeal which he wished to make to her, a strange diffidence seized him. She seemed so very young, so wholly unsophisticated, so far removed in her purity and her innocence from the scorching breath of a man's passion. He was afraid that he would scare her, that she would not understand all that lay in his heart, and that he wished to convey to her in a few glowing words which already seared his lips.

Therefore he called forth his strongest will-power now, and forced back the words of love which were rushing up, helter-skelter, from his heart, in mad disorder, and glowing, wild, delicious nonsense. He was

longing just to lie down close beside her, with his lips pressed against her feet, and to pour out all the flood of love, of worship and ecstasy which filled his heart to bursting. But will-power was strong in him, for on its strength, perhaps, depended all future happiness, both for him and for this child. It called back his unruly senses to calm and to self-control, and after a moment's pause during which he closed his eyes, for he could not bear to look on her and not tell her at once of his love, he said, quite quietly:

"May I tell you a tale?"

"A tale?" she asked, in astonishment. "What kind of a tale?"

"A fairy tale," he replied.

"Why should you want to tell me a tale now?"

"You will understand the reason after my tale has been told. May I begin?"

"If you like," she said, with an indifferent shrug of the shoulders.

"Once upon a time," he began, "all the flowers of the field rebelled against the Fairy Queen. They had got tired of the country, and wished to go up to town. 'We'll go to London,' said they, 'and see the world, and be seen and admired by all the townsfolk. We're tired of being looked on merely by stupid country folk!' This, mind you, is what the flowers of the field said to the Fairy Queen."

"Did you invent this tale, Lieutenant Carrington?" she asked.

"Yes, partly. Do you care for it?"

"Not very much so far. It seems to be rather pointless."

"How can you tell? I have only just begun."

"Will it take long?"

"Ten minutes. May I go on?"

"If you like," she reiterated, with still the same indifference.

"The Fairy Queen," he then went on, "could not very well stop them if they wished to go, so all the flowers of the field went to town — briar-rose and toad-flax, purple vetch and ox-eyed daisies. They were clipped and trimmed and put into vases and openly displayed in shops and markets. They suffered tortures with wires and string, but they didn't mind. They had had their way and had become town flowers."

"I still don't see the point of the story, Lieutenant Carrington," she said.

"You must have a little patience. I am coming to the point. In the general exodus from the fields, one little flower was forgotten. She was dainty and shy and hid under the hedgerows, and so her prouder sisters failed to notice her."

"What was her name?"

"I'll tell it you presently. The Fairy Queen saw her as she passed, she was touched by the flower's freshness and her grace, and then and there endowed her with all the attributes which the other flowers had disclaimed. She gave her scent so sweet that the bees and butterflies fight for a kiss from her, she gave her a white gown with dainty frills, and finally she gave her a name so beautiful and so pure that ever after it remained the emblem of tender womanhood."

"And what was that name, Lieutenant Carring-

ton?" she asked, shyly, timidly, almost in a whisper, for her voice had lost its quaint note of affectation, and her head was drooping as if under the weight of the gold in her hair.

"The name," he said — also in a whisper —"which always springs to my lips when I look at you . . . Meadowsweet!"

"My name is Boadicea Aldmarshe."

"Not to me! . . . Ever since that day when Fate thought fit to shuffle her cards and made us partners in this game of life, ever since then you have meant to me all that is fresh and pure in life — just a little sprig of meadowsweet."

"But the game is ended," she said. "Fate is shuffling her cards again."

He could not see her eyes, for they were downcast, but it seemed to him as if dewy moisture lingered on their lashes, and certainly there had been a tremor in her voice, as of tears that would rise to her throat.

"Is it ended?" he asked.

"Why, of course," she said; "we were partners not of our own free will."

"Yes, then. But now?"

"I don't know what you mean!"

"I could explain if . . ."

"If what?"

"If you would look at me."

She raised her eyes to his, and he saw that they were full of tears, and so bright, so bright that an infinity of promise lay within their luminous depths.

He could have fallen down and worshipped her then.

Never had he seen such innocence, such purity in any woman's eyes. From her whole personality there emanated such perfect trust, and such simplicity of soul, that even the ardent breath of passion must cool ere it touched her. Later on she would become a woman, no doubt; later on she would understand a man's love better, know all its ardour, and forgive all its sins; but now she was only a child, and it almost seemed sacrilege to disturb her serenity.

"May I go on with the fairy tale?" he asked.

"If you like," she said simply.

"One midsummer's day — while all the gayer flowers were parading the streets — the meadowsweet fell asleep under the hedgerow. The air was full of the song of birds, and the flap of butterflies' wings. And the West Wind came playing round that hedgerow. He peeped beneath and saw the Meadowsweet, so pure, so sweet, so exquisitely fair. He blew upon the blossom . . . and whispered words to waken the soul of the flower . . . words of tenderness . . . and of love. . . ."

The long lashes were once more veiling the glory of the eyes. She could not have gone on looking at him, whilst he spoke like that.

How exquisite was his voice! how tender the glance of his eyes. A delicious sense of happiness, of confidence and of faith crept into her heart. Something thrilled her, too, something that she did not understand; perhaps it was the scent of those white flowers in the shadow, for the very air seemed quivering with their fragrance.

"I don't suppose," she murmured shyly, "that the

Meadowsweet understood . . . tenderness, perhaps . . . but love? . . ."

"My Meadowsweet — the one of whom I speak — asked the birds and the bees, and they told her what the West Wind meant."

"But you say that she was asleep."

"Ah! but the West Wind woke her."

"How?"

He put his arms round her suddenly, without further thought, and only because he could no longer contain himself and his very body ached with the intensity of his desire for that first kiss. He took her in his arms, and his lips sought hers.

"Like this!" he said.

She yielded her lips to him, just like a child that would give all it has, for sheer love, for sheer happiness, for sheer desire to give. She yielded her lips and gave him kiss for kiss.

"Meadowsweet, my little Meadowsweet!" he murmured through broken sobs that came to his throat with the very intensity of his happiness. "It is too good, too good to be true! . . . You so beautiful, so dear, so sweet, do you . . . do you really love me?"

She smiled at him through her tears, and whispered timidly:

"The West Wind woke the Meadowsweet, you see . . . she has asked the birds and bees, and now . . ."

"Yes! And now?"

"I think that she understands."

She hid her face, which was covered with blushes. Then as he was about to pour into her ear all the words

of passionate adoration which he had held in check for so long, she quickly put up her small brown hand and her fingers were pressed against his lips.

And now she looked at him again, half shyly, and with a curious, questioning glance.

"Hush! sh! sh!" she said. "Don't speak now . . . don't tell me anything more. . . . It is all so new, so wonderful! I had never loved before," she added naïvely; "I never even knew what love meant. It must be so different for you."

"Until I looked into your dear eyes," he said earnestly, "until I scented the meadowsweet in the hedgerows, I never knew what love could mean."

She sighed with infinite content; you see, she had no idea that the world could be quite so beautiful as it was now; she had no idea how glorious could be the sunshine peeping through the branches of cherry-trees, how green could be the grass, how sweet the note of the cuckoo which came from far away. Everything in nature which she had seen and felt and heard, everything that she had admired and loved, was infinitely more lovable, more admirable now that she sat with a man's arms round her, and the savour of his kiss still lingered on her lips.

How long they sat together like this, neither of them did know; what they said to one another only the birds and bees could hear. I'll not plague you with telling you of that delicious nonsense which they talked, the tender, inane, sublime babblings of newly awakened love. Only those who remember their own first babblings would forbear to smile, and those who choose to remember are fewer and fewer every day.

In every human heart there is such a memory; every human soul has once been an infant suckling at the breast of Love, inarticulate, ecstatic, sublime in its inanity. But the strenuous exigencies of modern life have thrown a thick grey veil over the memory of that halcyon hour, and the veil has been allowed to cling to and to choke up memory until it has faded out of ken.

But those who have kept such memory green will understand, without being told, all that Jack Carrington and Boadicea said to one another under the cherry-tree that afternoon; as for the others, they would not care.

The hours slipped by and the shadows grew longer. From Minster tower far away came the sound of church bells ringing for evening prayer. Boadicea was the first to wake from an enchanting dream.

"And now I must go, my dear, my love!" she said, still shyly. "Aunt Caroline will be wondering . . . and, oh! it must be near supper-time."

"Not yet!" he pleaded.

"Oh, but I must go! I . . . I want to be alone — just for a little while . . . before I meet the others . . . I want to think . . . to live my happiness."

"Live it awhile longer in my arms."

"No . . . no . . . I must go . . . I really must!"

And she disengaged herself from those clinging arms, and, rising to her feet, she stood before him, demure and tall, with just that soft, rosy blush in her cheeks to betray her womanhood, to show that a man's kiss had blown the spirit of childhood away.

She meant to turn away from him without a word of parting, for it seemed to her that everything had been said that could possibly be said, and that the time had come now for a long and delicious silence.

But just as she was about to turn away, some thought seemed to flash through her mind, and it was she now who, with a sudden impulse, had put her arms on his shoulders.

"My dear," she said earnestly, "if anything should part us now . . ."

"What could part us, little Meadowsweet?" he asked exultantly, triumphant in his love.

"I don't know," she replied; "but if it should . . ." She paused a moment, then added slowly:

"It would break my heart!"

"Nothing on earth can part us now. I have held you in my arms, my Meadowsweet, and I have felt the magic of your kiss . . . do you think that I could after that allow anything to part us?"

"No! no! of course not," she said simply; "but it seems so strange! it seems as if this happiness was really too great to last!"

Then she turned away quickly, and ran towards the house, and he stood still under the cherry-trees, looking after her retreating figure as a man would on the embodiment of earthly happiness.

And the intoxicating fragrance of many blossoms was in the air. Overhead a thrush was singing to its mate; the swallows were circling high up above the trees, and tiny fleecy clouds raced across the sky.

Jack Carrington fell on his knees and thanked God for it all.

CHAPTER XXI

A LIE

WHAT a beautiful world it was!

The air was balmy and soft, not too hot and not too cool; never had the thrushes sung so beautifully; their incessant "He did it! he did it! he did it!" sounded just the right note in tune with this glorious afternoon. Had the sky ever been more brilliant and more filmy? had the flowers ever been so fragrant before, or the strawberries looked more luscious?

Of course they had not. Nothing had ever been so beautiful, so fragrant, or so luscious; in fact, one came to wonder how the world had got on at all before . . . before this . . . this wonderful thing happened.

The most wonderful thing that ever was had suddenly come to pass, and therefore the swallows twittered so merrily and circled round and round high up above the trees, in a manner indicative of their great joy, and therefore the thrushes said: "He did it, he did it, he did it!" over and over again because, of course, they knew that the one and only He in all the world had done it. The one and only He had opened the book of life and told Boadicea to read in it the great opening chapter — the chapter of Love.

Would you laugh in a very superior way if you heard that Boadicea ran straight up to her room and

threw herself on her narrow bed face downwards, and that she buried her hot little face in her hands, and cried, and cried as if her heart would break?

It was breaking, you know, with the intensity of her happiness. That happiness seemed really greater than her young heart could hold.

She cried for a while, and then she smiled through her tears, and kissed the palms of her hands, because they had touched his hair and his cheeks. Then she laughed at herself for being such a goose, and blushed at the thought of what he would say and do if he saw her now.

She jumped up from the bed and washed her face and eyes with cold water; and all the while she was singing merrier than any bird: "He did it! he did it! he did it!" He had opened up the store-house of her heart, and had put his own image there into a shrine. There it would remain for ever; it would take very cruel hands to tear it right out, hands that would lacerate the heart before ever they succeeded in their cruel purpose.

And he had done more than that; he had made the world beautiful for her, he had decked the lily and painted the sky, and taught her a great and wonderful lesson.

She knew now how deliciously sweet a kiss could be!

The old grandfather clock in the hall below struck six most solemnly. Though the world was so beautiful, time did not stand still. Boadicea gave a little sigh of disappointment. She had so wanted to spend a few happy hours contemplating her dream. But habit and a sense of housewifely duties still held pow-

erful sway, even over her excitement. Hastily she smoothed down the last rebellious brown curls, then she donned her housekeeping apron and was ready to go downstairs.

Half an hour before supper, and the cloth was not yet laid unless Susan had been more than usually active.

As she opened the door of her room, she saw Olive coming up the stairs. She was apparently going to her own room, but was moving with a languid step, as if she were tired or else very troubled. She paused on the landing, and looked with obvious surprise on Boadicea, whose glowing face, bright eyes, and whole personality quivering with joy and excitement betrayed a secret that was not difficult to guess.

Olive's eyes were sharp, and her intuition in such matters unerring. The child was simply brimming over with happiness, and Lieutenant Carrington had not yet come in from the orchard. It required no great penetration to fit these two facts into one very obvious whole.

"Why, child, where have you been?" exclaimed the older sister, feigning complete astonishment. "Aunt Caroline has been looking for you everywhere."

"I have been in the orchard," said Boadicea simply.

She had no occasion or desire to conceal the one great fact, though in her heart of hearts she would have loved to guard her secret just a little while longer, to feast on it, like a little glutton that would devour a world of happiness.

"In the orchard?" queried Olive, with just that delicate lifting of arched eyebrows which indicated

displeasure as well as surprise. "Were you alone?"

"No. Lieutenant Carrington was with me."

"Oh!" said the other indifferently. "By the way, child, just run down a moment to Aunt Caroline and see if she wants anything, then come and talk to me in your own room, will you? There is something I want to say to you."

Olive was smiling, and she spoke quite kindly.

"Run along, child. Don't be long," she added, as Boadicea, submissive and willing as usual, had already turned to obey. Her white skirt soon disappeared round the angle of the stairs. Olive watched her sister's retreating figure, until the light patter of her feet ceased to echo from below, then she turned and went into Boadicea's room.

She sat down at the dressing-table, in front of the old-fashioned mirror. Leaning forward she studied for awhile with grave attention the dainty image which the glass held before her; the tiny head crowned with curls of a pale golden hue, the colour of ripe corn, shimmering in the sunlight; the blue eyes and arched eyebrows, the softly-rounded cheek on which nature carefully aided by art had spread a delicate rosy tint.

The image was winning and charming in the extreme. No one who looked could deny this; no wonder that on Olive's face, as she gazed, there came an expression of deep puzzlement. Surely a man must be blind to look with favour on any other face but that which the mirror so kindly reflected. And being blind, he must, of course, be cured, and you may be certain that he will presently be thanking God on his knees for having been cured from his malady.

The resolution of performing this surgical operation was quickly come to. Olive now only chided herself for having been so considerate, so tender-hearted all this while. Lieutenant Jack had no doubt been miserable at her seeming indifference, and — almost in desperation — was turning to Boadicea for solace and consolation.

Well! all that could be put right with very little trouble. Olive marvelled that she had never thought of it before. Fortunately it was not too late; Lieutenant Jack's affections were not really engaged, and, of course, a child like Boadicea would soon forget her own silly sentimentality.

There came the sound of light feet upon the stairs. Olive went to the door and opened it, and the next moment the same excited, quivering, glowing Boadicea had followed her sister back into the room.

"Aunt did not really want me," she said. "I told her that you wished me to come to you, so, of course, she told me at once to run along, for she and Susan had nearly finished laying the cloth for supper."

She talked rather breathlessly and quickly, like one who has been running very fast. Olive put out an inviting hand to her, and in her childlike, impulsive way, Boadicea ran to the dearly loved sister, and in the exuberance of her joy kissed her tenderly.

She had no doubt but that Olive wished to question her, and she was looking forward to entrusting her precious secret to the one being in the world who she believed would understand her.

"Sit down near me, little one," said Olive gently, as

she sat down on one chair and drew another close to hers.

But Boadicea disdained the chair. She knelt down on the floor beside Olive and had her arms round Olive's waist, and her head against Olive's shoulder. She sighed with absolute content and also with excitement.

"I told you, dear, did I not," began Lady Jeffreys, after a slight pause, "that there was something which I wished to say to you?"

"Yes, Olive. What is it?"

"Well, little one, it is a confession which I feel bound in honour to make to you."

"A confession?" queried the girl, very puzzled.

"Yes, dear. One which I ought to have made to you long ago. . . . I mean a month ago."

"Is it very serious, then?" asked Boadicea playfully.

She was still so far from guessing what would come.

"Very serious to me," replied Olive earnestly. "I do not think that it will affect you much . . . only, perhaps," she added, whilst tears seemed to be on the point of gathering to her eyes, "in your estimate of me."

The arms round Olive's shoulders tightened their embrace. The face that was hidden against her bosom was raised to her with an expression of enduring affection and of boundless trust.

"Nothing could affect my estimate of you, Olive," said Boadicea tenderly; "you know that ever since I was a baby I have always looked up to you as the most beautiful, the most clever, the most perfect being in all

the world. And to this day you are my ideal — and the pattern whom I long to emulate."

"Well, dear, that is just what I cannot bear any longer . . . your innocent admiration, your loving faith weighs on me like a burden. . . . I am not worthy of it, little one . . ."

And this time two genuine tears ran down the delicately-rouged cheeks, making pathetic little rivulets which Olive did not even try to obliterate.

"Then what is this serious confession," asked Boadicea quite gaily, "which you feel called upon to make to me?"

"It is so hard to make," said Olive, with a sigh.

"Shall I turn my back? It might be easier."

"No, no! don't jest, little one. It hurts me to see you laugh."

"Olive darling!" exclaimed Boadicea, and for the first time since that wonderful moment this afternoon a curious pang of pain shot right through her heart.

"You know, dear," began Olive, after some hesitation, "a month ago . . . when Sir Baldwin came on us unexpectedly. . . ."

"Yes?"

"And I was alone with Lieutenant Carrington, you remember?"

"Yes, Olive."

The voice was a little harder now, and the arms that encircled Olive's shoulders dropped limply to the girl's side. Boadicea was still kneeling beside her sister, but her head was no longer pillowed on the sister's breast. She was squatting back, sitting on her heels; the glow had died from her cheeks, and left them white

and drawn; her eyes were fixed upon her sister's face, and her lips were tightly set and hard.

"Go on, Olive," she said quietly.

"I . . . I asked you, then, did I not, little one? to stand by me and to save me from my husband's jealousy?"

"I did it heartily and willingly, Olive, and I have not repented since."

"I swore to you then that I had done no wrong . . . that Sir Baldwin's jealousy was baseless and insane. . . . I led you to believe, in fact, that I had been merely thoughtless, and that Lieutenant Carrington had never made love to me . . . you believed this at the time, little one . . . did you not?"

"Yes, Olive . . . I believed this . . . at the time."

"Well, child, I . . . I lied to you then . . . I lied because I was afraid . . . but Sir Baldwin's jealousy was quite justified. . . . Lieutenant Carrington and I fully deserved his wrath. . . . Jack and I had loved one another for some time . . . and that night. . . ."

Almost against her will she paused. She had meant to put facts crudely, to plunge the poisoned dagger into the child's innocent heart, and then to turn it in the wound, so as to be quite sure that it had done its deadly work; but Boadicea's eyes had compelled her suddenly to silence, and for the next few moments silence absolute reigned in the small narrow room. Through the open window came still the hum of bees and the song of birds; but, oh! how out of tune were they. There was a peep of sky and of sunshine through that same window, and tiny, fleecy clouds chased one another across the canopy of blue, but they

were grey and dark, and the blue of the sky had faded into dreary dullness.

"I ought to tell you, child," resumed Olive at last, with an effort — for the silence had become oppressive.

"Tell me nothing now," said Boadicea in an even, toneless voice; "you have said enough . . . and I understand. . . . Now please go!"

She seemed suddenly to have grown older. Olive noted, not without satisfaction, how hard were the lines of the young face now. The sun struck full in through the open window, but Boadicea appeared not to notice it, she was staring straight in front of her, her face was the colour of grey ashes, and her lips were bloodless. Her arms hung limply by her side. She had forgotten Olive's presence, she had forgotten that she lived, and that the world existed, in this awful cataclysm which had destroyed her happiness.

Olive tried to reason with her. She was almost frightened at the havoc which she had wrought.

"Child, listen to me . . ." she urged.

But Boadicea, without moving from her position, murmured through her half-closed lips:

"Go . . . go . . . Oh! can't you see that you must go now!"

And Olive, without a word, slunk quietly out of the room.

CHAPTER XXII

A BROKEN HEART

It had all been lies! lies! lies!

He had lied to her: that was the great, the dominating fact which reared its grim head above the ashes of her joy.

He was a liar and had been Olive's lover! The lips which had murmured words of love into Olive's ear had come to whisper lies into her own.

The shame of it! The awful, awful shame! The desecration! The sacrilege! To talk of love and pollute it! To kiss, to embrace, and to be lying all the time! To sneak like a coward, afraid of Sir Baldwin's wrath; and then to sneak further like a liar and a cheat, stealing love and stealing kisses! Oh, the misery! The shame of it all!

It was not so much the sense of a cruel wrong done to herself that oppressed Boadicea's heart at this moment, but the knowledge that he was a liar, a sneak, and a coward! It was the shattering of her illusions that hurt her so terribly; it was the ruthless hand that tore at the image which she had enshrined that caused her physical and mental agony, so great that she could have rolled on the floor and cried out in bitterness of pain.

For the first few moments after Olive left her, life in

her seemed almost suspended. She was so stunned that her brain reeled. She saw nothing but blackness before her, blackness through which came voices mocking her and screaming shrilly: "He is a liar! He is a cheat!"

And now the thrush kept on repeating in a senseless, monotonous fashion: "He did it! He did it! He did it!"

He broke her heart by telling her lies without end; he cheated her into thinking him good, upright, honourable — he, her sister's lover, whom Sir Baldwin might, if he would, have thrashed like a dog with impunity.

The shame! The shame of it all! The cruel cowardly lies!

She stopped her ears, for that silly thrush would keep on saying: "He did it! He did it! He did it!" And when she could not shut out that monotonous sound she began to laugh. It really was too ridiculous!

She laughed and she laughed — loudly and jerkily. She could not stop herself from laughing, because that thrush was so very ridiculous.

And suddenly while she was still laughing, and her chest and throat were torn to pieces by painful sobs, the thrush ceased to talk nonsense. It seemed to pause and to be listening.

And Boadicea, too, listened.

From the orchard which lay not far from her windows there came the sound of a fresh, deep voice singing an old English song.

The refrain was quaint, and had in it a dreamy lilt, and the words rang out clear and distinct.

Queen of my heart, unquestioned and alway,
Till death consume me, thou shalt be indeed!
Reason ordains that I should ne'er be freed
(And there withal my pleasure doth agree)
From thy sweet service, while the years succeed,
And to this end we twain together be!

The sobs and laughter in the girl's throat were stilled. She squatted on the floor, there where she had knelt when Olive first told her the ugly, unvarnished truth.

She neither wept nor laughed now. Pain itself had subsided. It seemed as if that song sung by him in the orchard where he had lied to her had severed the last cords which bound her to illimitable regret.

She was no longer a child. The last half-hour had made her into a woman — a miserable, disillusioned, suffering woman: a woman conscious of abiding deceit and of abiding shame. But the paroxysm of grief had gone by, leaving her physically a wreck and mentally numb. It was a long time before she could bring her mind back to the realities of life and to its many puerilities.

Supper would be served almost directly. It was close on seven, and vaguely through her inert brain there had passed the consciousness of various familiar noises in and about the house — the rattling of pots and pans in the kitchen, Aunt Caroline going up to her room to tidy herself for supper, Cousin Barnaby clamouring for something or other that he wanted.

Boadicea rose to her feet; but she had to steady herself as she did so, for the walls of the room were dancing a merry-go-round in front of her. Cold water to her face and wrists brought a little sense of freshness.

She was soon able to master herself and to steady her limbs. She even said a few words aloud to herself to see if her voice trembled or not.

Then from the wardrobe she took out the high-waisted silk dress — the one which she had worn that first evening when Lieutenant Carrington stayed to supper, and then rode away, returning late at night for the pre-arranged rendezvous with Olive. She had not worn the dress since; it had seemed sacred to that one day when love was first born and peeped out shyly into the world.

Now love was dead, a liar's hand had smothered it with cruel embraces, a liar's tongue had spoken its funeral oration. Boadicea put on the high-waisted dress again; it had ceased to be sacred — it was just a rag that would help to mock the dying throes of agonising love.

Just as carefully as she had done on that memorable evening, she dressed herself in her mother's silken gown; she arranged her hair in puffs and curls with the high comb of filigree fold, and donned the long lace mittens and the narrow-pointed shoes with the crossed straps over the ankles. After that she studied her appearance in the mirror. She thought that she looked rather pale, and that her eyes seemed unnaturally large, for they had wide purple rings round the lids, but she hoped that her pallor would be generally ascribed to the heat, and in any case she felt the power in her to make light of it and to smile.

She took up the lace handkerchief and the tiny shell fan which she had carried before, and thus arrayed and equipped, she went downstairs.

Lieutenant Carrington was standing in the hall, smiling up at her as she descended. She looked a perfect picture of dainty girlishness, and his twinkling eyes told very plainly into what a fever of passionate admiration her very appearance had thrown him.

He ran to the foot of the stairs with both arms outstretched, ready to catch her the moment her small foot had touched the lowest step.

She paused, however, midway down the stairs and, with admirable self-control, forced her face and eyes to express nothing but lively unconcern, even whilst within her innermost heart she marvelled how true and loyal a miserable liar could contrive to look.

Half afraid that the contempt and loathing which she felt for him would betray itself within the next few moments, she gave a merry, affected laugh and ran so quickly down the stairs that his arms failed to catch her as she ran, and she escaped from him to the museum door.

He overtook her just as she was inside the room and was about to close the door on him.

"My Meadowsweet," he said gaily as he caught at her hand and held it imprisoned between his own, "queen of my heart, whither away?"

"A white-throat has nested in the mulberry-tree," she retorted as gaily as he. "I have just time before supper to steal the eggs for Uncle Jasper."

"But not in this gown," he said, with a smile that had something of triumph in it, and he tried to draw her closer to him, but she contrived to free herself and to interpose the big table with all the glue-pots and

brushes, the boxes of eyes and reels of wire, between herself and him.

"The gown will not suffer," she said lightly, "and this is the best hour of the day for birds'-nesting."

But she made no attempt to go, seeing which Jack Carrington's heart gave a wild thump of delight. He was feasting his eyes on the exquisite apparition before him, and was longing for Old Father Time to stand still for awhile, so that he might look and look until he was really satiated with the sight of her.

He thought that she looked pale and that her eyes were circled as if she had been crying, but at this he was not astonished. He, too, out in the orchard, in the shadow of the cherry-tree, had felt as if he could have cried out his heart for sheer happiness; he, too, felt as if all his blood had rushed back to his heart, causing it almost to burst with the greatness of his joy.

And her pale cheeks and purple-circled eyes made her seem a thousand times more beautiful to him than she had been before, for these touches of pathos gave to her strong personality an enchanting touch of childish weakness, which rendered her infinitely dear.

Uncle Jasper up on his perch was immersed in a ponderous book; through the open window came the soft sighing of the west wind through the drooping leaves of the cherry-trees.

"Will you come out into the orchard for ten minutes, little Meadowsweet?" he pleaded in a tender murmur.

She raised her eyebrows with an expression of affected surprise.

"What," she said, with a harsh little laugh, "again?"

"The sun is just beginning to set. It will be glorious through the trees. Come and look at it with me."

"How can I, in this gown?" she said coquettishly.

"The gown will not suffer. We'll walk through the grass, and the dew has not yet fallen. Do come, little Meadowsweet, there is so much that I have to say to you."

"Much to say to me?" she retorted. "Lord bless my soul, Lieutenant Carrington, I thought you had told me everything that you could possibly think of, and that you had exhausted the storehouse of your eloquence."

"I had not even begun," he said earnestly.

He was looking at her almost inquiringly now; he did not quite understand her. All the merry twinkle had gone from his eyes; they looked sorrowful and puzzled.

The eyes of a liar, she thought, who begins to fear that his lies have found him out.

She smothered a yawn, and turned her back on him.

"Then I am afraid," she said lightly, "that you will have to find some other listener now. I am tired of your rodomontades!"

For a moment he thought that excitement must have turned her brain. She looked absolutely a different woman; when she turned once more to him now, and faced him with that affected curl on her lips, that unnatural expression of empty coquetry in her eyes, he had to close his own just for a moment, for he really thought that he must be dreaming some ugly, horrible

dream, and that he must make a supreme effort to dispel it before it caused his own brain to reel.

When he opened his eyes again she was looking just the same — smiling, affected, distinctly bored.

"I — I did not think, dear, that I had tired you," he said gently. "You listened so patiently . . . that I hoped . . ."

"What?" she exclaimed, with a laugh. "What did you hope? That I should be willing to go on listening for another long ten minutes to your stale gallanteries? We may be fools in the country, Lieutenant Carrington, and uneducated savages, but we are not quite such fools as that!"

Then suddenly he thought that he held the key to this new mood of hers: she was just teasing him, playing with him like a kitten with a mouse. The game was cruel enough; the suffering which she was inflicting on him was greater than she could gauge, but he loved her so dearly that he could find it in his heart to forgive her readily, and to endure patiently any torment which she might think fit to impose upon him.

"My dear little Meadowsweet," he said, speaking with utmost tenderness, "I don't suppose that you realise for a moment quite how cruel is the game which you are playing with me."

"The game?" she asked. "What game?"

"You have a perfect right, of course, to tease and hurt me as much as you like if it gives you pleasure; but just now, when my happiness is so new and so unexpected, and I have not actually grasped the fact yet that your dear lips have really touched mine, just now, my beautiful Meadowsweet, the game is doubly

cruel. . . . And every word which you speak in jest cuts through my heart like a knife."

"Your heart?" And she laughed loudly and merrily. "Your heart? Oh, how funny! Lieutenant Carrington, do tell me where you keep your heart?"

"I am afraid that it has been in your keeping, dear, for a long time now . . . and I had hoped that it would remain there always."

"Always is such a long word. . . . What do you mean by 'always,' Lieutenant Carrington?"

"Until death," he said earnestly.

"But I have no intention of dying for a long while to come."

"I pray to God to fulfil that intention for you."

"Then how can your heart — as you are pleased to call it — remain in my keeping for that long while? . . . Whilst you are in the Antipodes and I in Thanet . . . it will get lost midway . . . in the great open sea."

"The great open sea will not always be between us, dear, will it?"

"I don't know. I should imagine that it would be . . . most of the time. . . . You are going to the Antipodes to-morrow, are you not?"

"I am going to Malta . . . but I shall soon be back."

"Indeed? How interesting!"

And she sank languidly upon the sofa. But in a moment now he was near her, kneeling beside her, and trying to imprison her hands. Gone was the merriment, the patience, the softness from his eyes, passion, anger, and reproach glowed within their depths.

"Meadowsweet," he said, and his voice was harsh, for she had wounded him cruelly and unwarrantably, and he no longer could bear the pain of that wound, "in the name of God cease this fooling, dear! I am only a man . . . nothing of a saint . . . I'll bear a great deal from you . . . but not this . . . not this. . . . This is beyond my strength."

"What is beyond your strength, Lieutenant Carrington?" she queried gaily. "Why are you so solemn? I don't understand you."

"Meadowsweet . . ."

"Why do you go on calling me that? It is so senseless; my name is Boadicea . . . and for Heaven's sake do sit down properly, and leave my hands alone. . . . Aunt Caroline will be here directly. . . ."

"To me you are Meadowsweet," he said slowly, trying to control himself, to keep calm in face of this awful nightmare, which was fast becoming reality; "you were Meadowsweet until just now, when you started playing so cruelly with me. You were Meadowsweet when you lay in my arms. . . ."

"In your arms? . . ." she ejaculated in mock surprise. "Come, come, you must not exaggerate. . . ."

"In my arms," he reiterated fervently. "You were my Meadowsweet when my lips sought and found your own . . . when you returned my kiss and quivered with passion like a rose under the subtle touch of the bee. . . ."

"Really, Lieutenant Carrington! . . ."

"You were my Meadowsweet when you told me that you loved me. . . ."

"I?"

"When you promised to be my wife."

"I? Your wife? . . . Your wife? . . ." And once more her ringing laugh echoed from end to end of the room. "Really, that is the funniest thing I have heard for a long time. I promised to be your wife? When?"

"In the orchard. Half an hour ago."

"You were dreaming."

"Indeed, it seems as if I must have been."

"Then I really must ask you, Lieutenant Carrington, to wake up from a dream which has such very unpleasant consequences for me. . . . I, your wife? Did you ask me to be your wife?"

"Have you forgotten?"

"No. But did you?" she insisted.

"I still ask you on my knees to leave off torturing me."

"And to be your wife?"

"And to be my wife."

"Then stay on your knees just half a minute longer, Lieutenant Carrington, for here comes Aunt Caroline with Cousin Barnaby, and I don't think that they ought to miss the fun."

CHAPTER XXIII

A STORMY PETREL

He would then and there have risen from his knees if he could, but he seemed rooted to the ground. His limbs were paralysed; he was unable to move, for he felt just like a man who has received a stunning blow on the head.

She had risen to her feet — calm, smiling and self-possessed — just when Aunt Caroline entered the room with Cousin Barnaby at her heels.

When Aunt Caroline saw the pretty picture — Boadicea in her quaint old-fashioned dress, standing there laughing gaily, and Lieutenant Carrington kneeling at her feet, she sighed with utmost satisfaction. It was delicious to see these two beautiful creatures in love with one another, and the wedding-cake would be the finest that Aunt Caroline had ever baked.

"Oh, Aunt Caroline, there you are!" exclaimed Boadicea. "I am so glad you have come. Lieutenant Carrington was just busy making violent love to me."

"Of course he was, child, of course he was!" said Aunt Caroline, somewhat taken aback and not a little shocked. "But you must not shout about it like that."

"Why not? It is so funny!"

"Funny? . . . My dear child!"

"Yes, Aunt. Don't you see how funny it is? Here's this gallant officer who asks the young savage from the country to be his wife. What do you think the birds will say to it . . . or the frogs or the beetles or the bees. . . . They'll laugh, of course. . . . We'll all laugh here . . . even the toads and bats will wink, for we in the country have fooled the man from town."

"Meadowsweet, have you no pity?" murmured the broken-hearted man.

"Child, child!" exclaimed Aunt Caroline in utter bewilderment. "What in the world are you talking about? What does it all mean? I don't understand you?"

"It's not at all difficult to understand, Aunt dear. Here's a fine gentleman who had it in his head that I cared for him, and that I really meant to be his wife."

"So you did!" retorted Aunt Caroline.

"If she didn't, she ought to be stuffed and kept in this museum as a stormy petrel!" growled Cousin Barnaby.

"I never intended to marry him," said Boadicea firmly—"never! I never meant to be his wife . . . the wife of an empty-headed, smooth-tongued gallant — never! never! . . . I fooled him as much as ever I could — because he called me a savage and I wanted to be revenged on him. . . . And I think that it is the funniest thing in all the world to see how I succeeded! . . ."

Then as Aunt Caroline remained speechless with horror and confusion, and Cousin Barnaby sat down in utter resignation at this new disturbance of his peace, Carrington rose to his feet.

"It is unnecessary to say more, Miss Aldmarshe," he said quite calmly. "Am I to understand that your desire is to intimate to me . . ."

"That I decline the honour of your hand in marriage, Lieutenant Carrington. Yes! that is my desire," she said.

And she swept him a deep and ironical curtsey.

"My dear child!" murmured Aunt Caroline.

"Oh, Aunt! isn't it funny?" cried Boadicea, whose voice now had become almost as shrill as Olive's, because she found the present game terribly difficult to play, and sobs were fighting laughter for mastery over her. "Lieutenant Carrington, I do wish you could see yourself, how foolish you look! But you looked still more foolish in the orchard, let me tell you, when with sheep's eyes, and sickly sighs, you told your wonderful legend of fairy flowers and meadowsweet and — what was it? — the West Wind! . . . You were so engrossed in your story that you did not notice how the young savage was laughing at you all the time."

"At any rate I know it now, Miss Aldmarshe," he said quietly. "Have I your permission to go?"

His face was so ravaged with grief that Boadicea herself would have been struck by it had she dared to look at him. But she would not trust herself to do that; she was terribly afraid of breaking down, of letting him see how terribly she suffered, how terribly she had been shamed.

He was a liar and a cheat, and no doubt for the moment his fatuous vanity was smarting under the blow; at best he might be feeling relieved at thought that he

was free once more, free to break other hearts, to lie to other women who trusted him as she had done.

Therefore she would not look at him, but poured out words which she hoped would lash him like a whip; she made fun of every word he uttered, taking a sort of grim pleasure in heaping odium and desecration on the smouldering ashes of her love.

"His wife?" she reiterated again and again, now addressing Aunt Caroline, now speaking to the empty air, to Cousin Barnaby, or to absent-minded Uncle Jasper. "Really, I think I shall die of laughter! Why don't you laugh, Aunt? . . . I fooled him, you know . . . made him think that I cared . . . and he talked sentiment and poetry to me, the little savage whom he despised . . . why don't you laugh, Cousin Barnaby?"

And she ran up to Mr. Crabtree, seized him by the coat-tails, just like the boisterous little madcap she used to be, and she dragged him up from his chair and twirled him and whirled him round and round, laughing all the time, as if she was the maddest, merriest creature on the whole of God's earth.

Aunt Caroline looked at her almost in fear. She thought that the child had gone mad. Even Uncle Jasper woke from his absorption and stared down at the strange bacchanalian dance. But he did not think that little Boadicea was mad, he had often seen her in these boisterous moods. She had always been a strange and a wilful child!

Then suddenly, in the very midst of her maddest frolic, Boadicea stopped short. Her eyes had met those of Jack Carrington. Her whole figure stiffened,

the hysterical laughter died on her lips; her face became stern and set and her cheeks deadly pale.

With one quick, imperious gesture, she pointed to the door, and looking straight at him, she said loudly:

"Go!"

CHAPTER XXIV

A HOPELESS OUTLOOK

And after that came dreary, dreary days in endless succession, dreary days the like of which had never been in this world before.

Everything became a hopeless, colourless blank, life was just one dreary thing after another; getting up in the morning, helping Aunt Caroline about the house, and going to bed in the evening. There was nothing else, nothing to look forward to in the morning, nothing to look back upon in the evening. Birds'-nesting was uninteresting, the old mare slow in her trot, the nightingales had ceased to sing, and only the wearisome cuckoo sent his monotonous tune through the flower-scented air.

Of course, it was impossible to go into the orchard now; that was beyond the capacity of any human soul. It was impossible to stroll in the long grass, or to sit in the forked branches of the old cherry-tree; the plums were ripening fast; there would soon come the awful moment when they, too, must be gathered for jam-making.

Boadicea, thinking of the day when she would perforce have to go into the orchard, and perch upon a ladder that would be resting perhaps against the very tree where he . . . Boadicea, thinking of that, felt that life could not hold worse tortures for any living

heart than the revisiting of places where Happiness and Love had paid such fleeting visits.

And the worst of it was that in the midst of all this weariness and monotony there was a part to play. Boadicea was not the woman — she was a woman now — to wear her sorrows, the signs of her broken heart, upon her face. Neither Aunt Caroline nor Uncle Jasper nor Cousin Barnaby should see that she was a miserable, broken-hearted creature, who cried half the night in unspeakable wretchedness, and was wearing out her young life in bitter regrets. No! they should see nothing of her misery, and neither should Olive. Oh, above all, Olive should see nothing, Olive who also had lied, who also had cheated, Olive who had at last fallen from the pedestal where her adoring sister had enshrined her all these years.

Uncle Jasper and Cousin Barnaby were, of course, too much absorbed — one in his books, the other in himself — to notice any change in Boadicea. She accompanied Uncle Jasper in his birds'-nesting expeditions, and looked after Cousin Barnaby's hot water bottle, just the same as she had always done.

Aunt Caroline, however, was not quite so blind. She could not help noticing that the child's eyes were now always circled with dark lines, that she ate very little, and that her cheeks and chest were rapidly falling in. She prescribed rhubarb and treacle and dandelion root, all of which Boadicea obediently and cheerfully took, but the girl's appetite did not return, nor did her cheeks regain their roundness.

All of which greatly puzzled Aunt Caroline. The situation was altogether beyond her comprehension.

It was Boadicea who had behaved shamefully towards Lieutenant Carrington — Mamie Carrington's boy — and yet it was Boadicea who seemed miserable, and who had lost her appetite; therefore the child's pale cheeks and loss of appetite could not on the face of it have anything to do with the broken engagement.

Aunt Caroline tried to question Boadicea, but her anxiety was met with such placid serenity, and with such gentle obstinacy that she soon gave up trying to find out anything from the child.

After that highly improper, unladylike scene in the museum that evening, Lieutenant Carrington had called — only once — on the following morning to proffer his respectful adieux to Mr. and Mrs. Hemingford. Boadicea had not come down to see him, and he went away, after staying exactly ten minutes by the museum clock, and Aunt Caroline declared that they were the most uncomfortable ten minutes which she had ever spent.

H.M.S. Dolphin made tracks for the Mediterranean that self-same afternoon, and since then one letter had come from Lieutenant Carrington for Mrs. Hemingford, and one for Boadicea. Both letters had been posted from Cherbourg; in the one written to Aunt Caroline Jack had endeavoured to express his gratitude for all the kindness which had been showered upon him at Old Manor Farm.

Aunt Caroline had cried when she read the letter; it was so beautifully written, she said, and showed what a noble-hearted fellow Mamie Carrington's boy had proved himself to be. She expressed the fervent wish

that some day he would meet a really nice girl, who would make him as happy as he deserved to be.

Olive had been in the hall when the postman brought the two letters; she it was who persuaded Aunt Caroline not to give the other one to Boadicea.

"The child is so very determined," she said, "and so bitter on the subject of Lieutenant Carrington just now, that to allow a correspondence to be started between them at this juncture would only aggravate the situation and cause a great deal of unhappiness to both sides."

Aunt Caroline would have demurred, but Olive always had an irresistible way with her.

"I shouldn't give this letter to Boadicea just now, Aunt," she said, with that authoritative air of hers which Aunt Caroline never could disregard. "Let me put it by for a little while — say, for a month or two — until the child's curious temper has had time to calm down, and she is able to look at things a little more coolly. I do firmly believe that if you will only give her time, and in the meanwhile do not even mention Lieutenant Carrington's name to her, everything may yet be well."

"Do you really think so, Olive?" said Aunt Caroline, with a sigh.

"I do really. I am sure you would be doing an infinity of harm by giving the child this letter at the present moment. You know what she is: impulsive and wilful to a degree! She would, in her present mood, probably send an answer back to Lieutenant Carrington which would offend him beyond the hope

of his ever forgiving her. Silence and his continued absence are the best chances of reconciliation."

Of course, Aunt Caroline was far too unsophisticated to see through Olive's clever machinations. She firmly believed that her worldly niece's advice could not help but be sound, and never for a moment did it enter her head that Olive's desire to gain time and to keep Boadicea and Lieutenant Carrington apart was solely actuated by her selfish hope that she in the meanwhile would succeed in regaining Jack's regard and in once more enchaining his truant allegiance to herself.

"Very well," said Aunt Caroline after a brief moment of hesitation, "I'll put the letter by, and only give it to Boadicea when I see that she is in a better frame of mind."

"No, no," protested Olive. "If you put that letter by, Aunt, you will never be able to find it when the time comes for giving it to the child. Let me take charge of it. I'll give it her just at the right moment, you may be sure of that."

Thus did Olive's scheme succeed most admirably. After a little more persuasion she got Aunt Caroline round to her way of thinking, nor had the good soul any thought of seriously opposing her niece in such a matter. Lady Jeffreys, who was one of the most prominent members of London society, would be sure to know exactly what had best be done under these very trying conditions. Aunt Caroline soon became convinced that it was distinctly her duty to withhold Lieutenant Carrington's letter from Boadicea, at any

rate, temporarily, whereupon she handed it over without further demur to Olive.

After the episode Aunt Caroline became greatly absorbed in the making of jams, pickles, and preserves, and it was small wonder that, in the midst of these important duties, she wholly forgot all about Lieutenant Carrington's letter. In fact, after a while she managed to forget all about Lieutenant Carrington himself and his engagement to Boadicea. A day or two after the incident of the letter Olive announced her intention of leaving Old Manor Farm at the end of her prolonged visit. She proposed to spend the remainder of the summer at a fashionable watering-place on the Continent.

Boadicea took farewell of the sister — whom she had so dearly loved — almost with a feeling of relief. Olive's presence in the house had greatly added to her misery. She felt how completely shipwrecked were all her illusions and all her joys of life. The man whom she had loved, the sister whom she had trusted, had been the two first teachers who had taught her how base and deceitful human creatures could be. It was a lesson which she was not likely to forget. The shadow which now hung over her life would no doubt never be lifted. It had altered her entirely, her soul and her mind were alike different to what they had been before, even her body had undergone a change. She felt no longer young, no longer full of life and joy, things which before had delighted her no longer pleased her now. She did not care what happened, for nothing could happen that would ease the load of sorrow and of disappointment from her heart.

CHAPTER XXV

A SENTIMENTAL CONVERSATION

And then the summer and the autumn went by.

Aunt Caroline had made strawberry jam, then cherry jam, then walnut pickle, and finally damson cheese, after which came the curing of bacon, the fattening of the Christmas turkey, the making of the twelve Christmas puddings — one for the first Sunday of every month, to be eaten throughout the year when the Vicar of Minster came over to dine at Old Manor Farm after the Communion service.

Sir Baldwin and Lady Jeffreys had spent a couple of months on the Continent, then they settled down at Ashford Great Court — their country residence — for the shooting, and Lady Jeffreys gave some very smart parties there during the autumn. The echo of these fashionable entertainments did reach sometimes as far as Old Manor Farm, Mr. Culpepper riding over every now and again from the Abbey to take tea with Mr. Hemingford, and bringing over the news with him, but Aunt Caroline was too busy about the house to take a great deal of interest in social events, and it really seemed now as if Olive and her world were very far removed from the humble folk in Thanet.

Though Ashford was distant from Old Manor Farm only twenty-two miles, Lady Jeffreys never came throughout the autumn to visit her uncle and

aunt. She wrote several pleasant and chatty letters to Boadicea, and made many agreeable, if somewhat vague, suggestions that the child should come and spend a few days at Ashford Great Court. But to these invitations Boadicea gave no reply, nor did Olive seem to expect any; she never fixed any definite time for the visit, and so it never came about.

Twice during that autumn did Sir Baldwin come riding over in the morning, having made an early start from home; but he only stayed to dinner and returned in the afternoon. He seemed more morose even than usual, and was apparently very wrathful with Boadicea for her treatment of Lieutenant Carrington. But he was far too well-bred and far too reserved in his speech to make open allusion to such matters, since he would not consider it his business to do so.

Directly after Christmas he and Lady Jeffreys went to Bath, as was customary with them and a great many fashionable folk. They stayed there some little time, Sir Baldwin being greatly troubled with gout that year; but exactly how long they were there I could not tell you, nor where they went to after that. All I know is that in May they had once more returned to their town house in St. James's-street, which had been beautifully redecorated in view of the coming season, and that all the fashionable journals of that year speak in glowing terms of Lady Jeffreys' entrancing beauty, and of her charm as one of the leading hostesses of the day.

The King and Queen, as you know, graced her house with their presence on one occasion, and she constantly entertained the *élite* of fashionable London

society. Never, in fact, had Olive more cause to be satisfied with her own dainty person and with the circumstances of life which rendered all things extremely pleasant to her.

Jack Carrington was home on leave after nine months spent in Malta. He had been invalided home, as he had greatly suffered from low fever, a fact not to be wondered at, considering the heat of the climate of Malta and the primitive methods of sanitation displayed at that otherwise delightful station.

At first Olive had been greatly shocked at Lieutenant Jack's altered appearance. He looked like a middle-aged man, with bowed shoulders, and a touch of grey on the temples. Low fever was evidently a very trying complaint, one that affects the mind as well as the body, for Jack's spirits had lost all their buoyancy. He seemed listless and apathetic even in the presence of the prettiest woman in London, and Olive vainly waited for those charming tokens of gallantry with which Lieutenant Jack had delighted her and won her regard a year ago.

Of course, the task of looking after the bodily welfare of a young and well-looking naval lieutenant is often a pleasing one, more especially when that naval lieutenant is interesting to a large circle of ladies, who become rivals for his attentions. Jack Carrington was always popular in London society, but seemed doubly so now that his appearance suggested something of sorrowful romance. Olive — whose powers of hinting and insinuating were far above the average — soon drew these suggestions of romance toward herself.

She quickly managed to persuade her friends that Jack Carrington's altered appearance and listless manner were due to his hopeless attachment for her; and from persuading her friends in this manner she soon succeeded in persuading herself.

She became quite convinced that Lieutenant Jack was pining himself into an early grave because of his thwarted love for her, and his chivalrous sense of duty as opposed to his burning passion.

Whereupon she increased her show of kindness toward him. She was in turn motherly, sisterly, friendly, tender, sorrowing, pitying, until he — over grateful for her charity and hating that very society which he used formerly to enjoy — found pleasure only in his visits to her.

During all this while he never once mentioned Boadicea in his conversation, and on this Lady Jeffreys looked as a good sign. But in her work of recapturing his wandering allegiance she went charily to work. She had almost alienated him once by over-impulsive actions, and she was far too great an adept in the art of winning an admirer to fall twice into the same error.

It was one evening in the conservatory, during one of her most brilliant receptions, that Olive received the first shock which told her that everything was not going on quite as well as she could have wished.

She was looking radiantly beautiful that night, and was conscious of her own irresistible charm. Whilst a string-band was discoursing a dreamy motet by Lully, she lured Jack Carrington into the conservatory. It was filled with lilies, and the air all round was soft

and fragrant. The sound of the music penetrated faintly to this distant part of the room, and dim lights burned low among the fronds of ferns and the gently swaying curtains of maiden-hair or of grevillea.

Olive chose a low seat on which to recline, a seat nestling in a clump of palms and lilies artistically grouped, and she allowed Jack to sit close beside her, so that the perfume from her hair and her handkerchief mingled agreeably with that of the flowers.

The folds of her pretty gown fell gracefully across his knee, and her hand fell listlessly to her side and came in gentle contact with his.

Everything, as you see, was well disposed for sentimental conversation. Olive sighed with satisfaction and pleasurable anticipation, and wielded her fan preparatory to embarking on those delightful paths where the ice is very thin indeed, and every footstep might lead to dangerous falls. And yet, in spite of the lilies and of the fragrance in the air, in spite of the folds of her gown and the proximity of her hand, Lieutenant Carrington engaged the conversation by a reference to Old Manor Farm. He would talk of Aunt Caroline and of her excellent dinners, of Cousin Barnaby's ill temper and Uncle Jasper's eccentricities, and this despite the fact that Olive looked bored from the first and subsequently grew markedly impatient.

Time was getting on. An attentive hostess could not absent herself from her guests for more than fifteen minutes, and ten had already gone by in a discussion of Aunt Caroline's pickles. It was truly exasperating. A daintily shod foot was tapping the ground in angry impatience. But Lieutenant Carrington seemed quite

oblivious of this fact; his conversation rambled on, and presently he mentioned Boadicea's name.

He did not say much, and while he spoke of the girl his voice certainly had none of that softness of tone which might suggest latent tenderness. Olive, therefore, had no cause for pique, and yet she bit her lower lip almost viciously, so angry was she at Jack's want of tact.

Soon the subject was dropped. Two or three other couples had wandered into the conservatory, and there was no longer any chance on this perfect occasion for the sentimental conversation which Olive had desired.

She felt very provoked and dismissed Lieutenant Jack with unusual curtness. He seemed quite unconscious of having offended her, and at the last, when he kissed the tips of her fingers bidding her adieu, he actually had the effrontery to beg of her to use her influence with Boadicea, that the young girl should grant him a personal interview.

"I cannot help feeling convinced," he had said earnestly, "that her extraordinary attitude towards me is the result of a grave misunderstanding, which perhaps two words freely exchanged would put right. I would kneel to you now, Lady Jeffreys, if I dared, and thus beg you to use your influence with her that she should grant me one short interview."

It would not have been either dignified or politic to refuse. Olive promised him that she would do what she could.

CHAPTER XXVI

A BUNCH OF ROSES

THAT was a week ago, and since then Olive had met Jack Carrington several times, and never once did he allude to Boadicea or to his request for an interview with her. Of course, he knew that some days must elapse for letters to pass between the sisters to and fro, but Olive consoled herself with the thought that if he really cared for the interview he would not keep such persistent silence about it.

He came to see her on the morning of her birthday, having taken the gallant precaution to send a bouquet of La France roses to propitiate the goddess who he hoped would do so much for him. On Olive alone — so he thought — depended his chances of an interview with his dear little Meadowsweet — still infinitely dear despite the hurt which she had so wantonly inflicted upon him. From Olive he hoped at last to get the welcome news that he might journey down to Thanet with the certainty of seeing once more that exquisite childlike face, the great wondering eyes, and tender mouth that meant earthly happiness to him.

But Olive had no idea that La France roses sent on her birthday morning could possibly mean anything but discreet and respectful admiration for herself, and when presently Jack Carrington was shown into her

pretty mauve and blue room, she extended a very gracious hand to him.

"How kind of you to come, Jack!" she said, with one of her most bewitching smiles.

"Kind?" he exclaimed. "I should be an ungrateful wretch, indeed, if I did not at least pay my respects to you, Lady Jeffreys, on your birthday. You have always been such a good friend to me."

"So many women have been that to you, Jack!"

"Friends? No, I think not. People in London have been more than kind. But on the whole I shall not be sorry to leave England. Society is not much in my line now, is it, Lady Jeffreys?"

"Oh, I don't know! You seem to get on in it remarkably well. But what makes you talk of leaving England? You are not going away?"

"Indeed I am. The *Dolphin* leaves for the China seas early in next week."

"But you are not going in her?"

"Please God, I am!"

"But you have been offered an appointment in the Admiralty?"

"Yes. Entirely through your kind influence, Lady Jeffreys, and no one could be more profoundly grateful than I am to you, but . . ."

He paused, hesitating somewhat, knowing instinctively — though Heaven knows he was not proud of it — that the announcement which he was about to make would affect her very unpleasantly.

He questioned her with a look, and saw that she was frowning, and that her face was hard and set, just

as it often was when anything in life occurred in opposition to her wishes.

"You have refused the appointment?" she asked curtly.

"My letter of refusal and of thanks goes in to-night."

"Don't post that letter, Jack!" she entreated.

"I really must, Lady Jeffreys."

"But why?" she asked.

"I can't bear to stay in England," he replied dully. "I cannot bear it. I would far rather go away, unless . . ."

"Unless what?"

"Can't you guess?"

"No. I cannot," she said more softly, thinking indeed that she could guess how her own harshness was driving him away from England. "Tell me, Jack, what is it that would keep you in London?"

Then as he did not reply immediately, she said more languishingly still:

"Why do you hesitate, Jack? Tell me. I might be able to help you."

"You can help me, Lady Jeffreys," he said eagerly. "That brief interview with Boadicea. . . . Have you asked her?"

"Yes," replied Olive drily.

Gone was all the softness in her voice, the languorous look in her eyes. Her sister's name, spoken by Jack at this moment, had acted like a shower of icy water upon her temperament, so ready to yield and to sentimentalise. But Jack was quite unconscious of the change in her voice. He did not notice her annoy-

ance any more than he had understood her more passionate mood. His thoughts were of Meadowsweet, and of the hope of seeing her, and everything else was as if it never existed at all.

"Will she . . . will she grant me the interview?" he asked.

"She refuses to see you."

"But why — in Heaven's name? Why?" he urged.

"I cannot tell you," she replied harshly. "Boadicea is a curious child, as you know. She lent herself readily enough at first to the brief farce of an engagement with you; but she only did it for my sake, and because she really thought that Sir Baldwin was at that moment capable of doing me an injury. She never cared for you . . . you know."

"I thought that she did," he murmured almost involuntarily, for his thoughts had quickly flown back to that glorious day in June, to the orchard fragrant with spring flowers, to the old cherry-tree in the forked branch of which had sat his little Meadowsweet with the bright, wondering eyes, and the red lips that were so good to kiss.

"Ah!" said Olive more gently, as she put a hand upon the young man's shoulder; "that is where a man's heart is so strange, Jack. It so often seeks love where none exists, and passes true love indifferently by."

"You think, Lady Jeffreys," he insisted with that sublime tactlessness of a heart filled with the image of another woman, "you really think that there is no hope for me?"

"Hope?" she retorted. "Why should you speak of hope in connection with a heartless, wayward child? The sooner you forget her the better for your own dignity, I should imagine. Your vanity alone is wounded, Jack, believe me. You will soon get over it. There are others, you know, who could well show you of what depths of affection a woman's heart is capable."

"But the whole thing puzzles me so hopelessly, Lady Jeffreys. . . . It seems to me as if I should never know another happy hour until I have seen daylight through that amazing veil of mystery. It is all so unlike Boadicea . . . she is so simple-hearted . . . so true and loyal in her disposition. I no more can think of her playing such a cruel game as she seems to have done than I would think of a Madonna being a fickle coquette."

"Lord bless my soul, man," exclaimed Olive, whose patience was now utterly exhausted, and who took no longer any pains to hide her anger, "did you come to see me to-day for the sole purpose of gushing over my sister's perfections? For, if so, let me tell you that your rodomontades are not at all to my liking."

"A thousand pardons, Lady Jeffreys!" he rejoined quite humbly. "I seem, indeed, to have lost myself as well as my manners recently. You are quite right. I must not plague you with my troubles. May I take my leave now?"

She hesitated for a moment, then thought it best to accede. Jack took his leave without another word. He was evidently not in the mood in which she would have liked to see him, and, moreover, she wanted to

think matters out now, for they had shaped themselves altogether differently to what she had anticipated.

And as soon as she was alone she did begin to think.

Though nothing of very serious import had happened, yet somehow she felt that the last half-hour had sounded the death-knell of her own hopes. Obviously she had never really cared for Jack Carrington, not in the same sense in which good women understand the words "to care." Hers was an essentially shallow nature, wholly incapable of lasting or genuine feeling beyond sympathy for and love of self. Her own amusement and pleasure was the ultimate aim of every one of her actions. Jack Carrington had been the lion of London society, and it had amused her to chain him to her triumphant chariot. She liked his unsophisticated gallantries, the attentions which he paid her, but above all she liked the other women of her own set to envy her her conquest of the most popular man in London.

It had amused her to render Sir Baldwin jealous, to play him the trick of outwitting him when he had tried to stop the scandal that coupled her name with that of Lieutenant Carrington by taking her away from London in the height of the season; but she was as incapable of genuine passion as of sacrificing her reputation and position for any man in the world.

It all was only amusement. If Jack Carrington had broken his heart over her she would have been still more highly amused.

The engagement between Boadicea and Lieutenant Carrington she had looked upon as a necessity. Her

own bodily safety and the upholding of her own reputation were of far greater moment than the feelings of two young people whose obvious duty it was to protect her at a critical moment against her husband's violence. But when the first breath of sentiment mingled with the prosiness of the mock engagement, then the situation ceased to be amusing. The only strong feeling of which Olive was capable was that of supreme egoism. Her position as elder sister chaperoning a younger one did not please her in the least, and she certainly would not allow another woman to wrest from her the conquest which she firmly believed she herself had made, even if that other woman happened to be her own sister.

No, there certainly was no affection in her heart for Jack Carrington, but there was a vast deal of vanity, and that vanity had received a severe blow when she first noticed signs of awakening love for another woman in the man whom she would have liked to tie in perpetuity to her own apron strings.

She fought with all the armoury at her command to regain possession of Carrington's allegiance, and her foremost weapon she had used with complete effect. She had succeeded in parting Jack from Boadicea, and she knew her sister well enough to be quite satisfied that the blow which a callous and lying tongue had dealt would remain incurable so long as Boadicea had no opportunity of a calm explanation with Lieutenant Carrington. The subject, of course, was one which the young girl was not likely to put into crude words at any time; still, an interview might certainly prove dangerous, fraught with the risk that Olive might

stand before her sister and before the man whom she still desired to conquer as a shameless and miserable liar.

However, there was certainly no fear just now that that interview would take place. Boadicea was safely stowed away in the wilds of Thanet, and was no doubt busy forgetting in the midst of jams and pickles that she had ever been engaged to marry Lieutenant Carrington.

As for Jack, well, I must confess that Lady Jeffreys' thoughts became somewhat troubled on that subject. If she had made no headway in his affections in the past few weeks, was she very likely to succeed in doing so as time went on? Her vanity — which was abnormal — certainly demanded that she should not give up even this semblance of conquest. Some women she knew of, in her own set, would indeed jeer at her if Lieutenant Carrington did finally break away from her apron strings. But her desire to keep him in London was certainly not so great as it used to be. If Jack no longer dangled round her skirts, then he might as well go to the China seas. Lady Jeffreys had but to lift a finger and she would soon find a substitute for that very indifferent admirer.

Jack was not amusing when he talked of Aunt Caroline's pickles and of Boadicea's eyes; and as he ceased to be amusing so his personal value went down in Olive's estimation.

Moreover, if he still did hanker in a half-hearted manner after the little savage from Thanet, he would with characteristic masculine obstinacy persist in his desire for an interview with her.

And that interview must not take place.

On that — if on nothing else — was Lady Jeffreys absolutely determined.

She preferred the China seas for Jack and a new admirer for herself.

CHAPTER XXVII

A LITTLE PLAN

"I HAVE just met Carrington on your doorstep, m'dear!"

"Yes, he called to wish me a happy birthday and he brought me some lovely roses."

Sir Baldwin had spoken quite pleasantly, and she indifferently. We may safely assume that neither tone was wholly sincere. Sir Baldwin — though his jealousy no longer fastened itself on Lieutenant Carrington — was never very pleasant when the young man called at the house in St. James's-street, nor was Olive ever indifferent when her husband mentioned the name of Jack.

But to-day Sir Baldwin's mood appeared most serene. He did not frown at sight of the roses, and presently he took possession of one of the most comfortable chairs in the room, and lounging in it he looked for all the world as if he meant to stay and have a long chat with his wife — a thing which, believe me, he very seldom did.

"I understood from Lieutenant Carrington," he said complacently, "that he had been paying you his farewell visit."

"Yes," she replied drily. "Lieutenant Carrington proposes to refuse the splendid appointment offered

him in the Admiralty, and to sail in his old ship next week."

"And all because a flirty miss is making a fool of him."

"I pray you, Sir Baldwin, not to be so coarse in your references to my sister."

"I only speak of her as she deserves. I have no patience with the girl, and only wish it were my business to give her a sound talking to. But I shall get an opportunity one of these days. . . . Why don't you speak to her, Olive? . . . You would have some influence over her — curse her obstinacy!"

"Boadicea prefers not to see Lieutenant Carrington — she does not want to discuss the subject at all. She has told me so in her letters over and over again."

"The heartless little reprobate! . . . You women are all alike . . . and we men are just a lot of silly, gullible fools!"

"You wrong yourself, at any rate, Sir Baldwin!"

He took no heed of the obvious sarcasm, but continued in the same pleasant, even, conversational tone:

"I must say, though, that I had thought better of little Boadicea."

"And did you tell Lieutenant Carrington so?"

"Yes. Frankly, I did."

"And what was his remark on the subject?"

"He merely said that it would obviously be best for him to sail to China. He thanked me for my solicitude, and he desired to remain your ladyship's and my most humble and most devoted servant."

Sir Baldwin Jeffreys was in the habit of taking snuff, a habit which became him remarkably well, for

he had fine, aristocratic hands, and a selection of beautiful gold and enamelled snuff-boxes. He took a pinch of snuff now, an act which left him free quietly to observe his wife, to note her impatient frown, and to chuckle to himself at private thoughts of his own which he was on the point of imparting to her.

"I must tell you that I did give Lieutenant Carrington the advice not to decide about that Admiralty appointment just yet," he said when he had once more restored his gold snuff-box to his pocket, and was again lounging in the luxurious chair.

"Indeed?" she remarked casually. "I thought that he was obliged to give his decision in that matter to-day."

"Yes. But I told him that so much can happen in one day . . . say, between dawn and sunset."

"A very poetical way of putting it, but I don't suppose that your eloquence, Sir Baldwin, would cause Lieutenant Carrington to change his plans."

"I don't know so much about that," retorted Sir Baldwin, with marked complacency. "I certainly know of one thing that would keep Carrington hanging about in London."

"And what may that be?"

She was getting a little impatient with his obvious contentment with himself, and slightly on the alert for something unpleasant which might be lurking behind his unaccustomed good-humour.

"The hope of an interview with Boadicea," he replied.

"Ah? I doubt if Lieutenant Carrington has any such hope."

"He hadn't until just now, when I asked him to come back here at sunset. . . ."

She turned her own chair right round, so that she could look him full in the face. He sat there smiling blandly, with his finger-tips tapping against one another, his head slightly cocked on one side, and regarding his wife with a look of distinct triumph.

An awful fear caused her heart suddenly to stand still. Every drop of blood fled from her cheeks, her eyes were dilated and her lips quivering. But she forced herself to speak quite calmly, vaguely hoping that her face was not betraying all that she felt.

"May I take the liberty of inquiring, Sir Baldwin, why you should have asked Lieutenant Carrington to return here at sunset?"

"A little plan," he said airily—"a little plan for which I entertain the greatest hope."

"Indeed? May I ask what this little plan is?"

"Certainly, my dear. Originally it was a desire—a not very unusual one with me—of pleasing you."

"In what way?"

"I arranged a surprise for your birthday."

"A surprise!"

"A visit, my dear, from your sister," he said triumphantly.

To Olive's credit be it said that she did not wince under this sudden blow. On the contrary, she pulled herself very quickly together and appeared even more unconcerned than she had been before. But the blow was all the more cruel as it was quite unexpected. She seemed in one moment to see the entire edifice of her fabric of falsehoods tottering beneath her feet.

There might in the near future be nothing for her but more and more lies, under most humiliating conditions, or the tacit acknowledgment of the original lie before her young sister and before Jack.

The position would be intolerable. For the moment, of course, she had no time to give it further thought. Sir Baldwin was gazing on her with that same irritating self-complacency, and it would be madness to let him see now that she was in any way disturbed by his news.

"A visit from Boadicea!" she said, feigning pleased surprise. "Do you really think that she would come?"

"I am sure she will," he replied. "I wrote her some days ago saying that you seemed very dull and lacking in spirits, suffering somewhat from megrims, and so on; and I begged her for my sake to come over for two or three days and to reassure me, if possible, about your general health."

"Admirable, admirable, I must say! Your inventive powers do you the greatest credit."

"Well, I was afraid that she might not come unless I put it that way."

"Quite so. And has she accepted your invitation?"

"Yes, she has!"

"And let me know nothing about it?"

"I told her that I wished her coming to be a surprise for your birthday. . . . The thought pleased her, I think. . . . Anyway, she is coming," he concluded jovially.

"When?" she asked.

"Almost immediately. I sent the coach with relays to fetch her. I reckoned that she would arrive in time for luncheon."

Then as Olive remained silent, too much absorbed in her own thoughts and fears now to make an attempt at cheerfulness, he asked, with sudden concern:

"You are glad, Olive, are you not?"

"Glad? . . . Glad?" she replied vaguely. "Of course I am glad! What else should I be? It is a pleasant surprise, as you say."

"And then you see my plan? . . . A final visit from Carrington. . . . Eh? . . . Boadicea here . . . alone, for you must arrange that. . . . What do you think of it all?"

"Think? Think?" she said as quietly as she could, for her voice was trembling and every moment angry tears threatened to rise to her eyes. "I think it an admirable plan . . . to force my sister into an unfortunate marriage, now that she has found out her mistake and realised that she does not care for the man. . . . Admirably thought out, indeed!" she added more vehemently, whilst a tone of bitter spite crept into her voice. "Our own marriage has been so brilliant a success! . . . No wonder you desire to see another equally such perfectly ill-assorted pair!"

"But, my dear . . ." protested Sir Baldwin feebly, for he had been wholly taken aback by his wife's extraordinary attitude.

"Well, what is it? You don't expect me, I presume, to be over-delighted at the prospective unhappy marriage which you desire to force upon my sister."

"But . . ."

"We will not discuss it any further, Sir Baldwin," she said, with injured dignity. "You have chosen to take my sister's fate into your own hands. I suppose that when the inevitable occurs and she flies to me for protection against the husband whom you will have forced upon her, you will be prepared to give her a home."

She rose from her chair and went up to a small writing-desk, where she stood for awhile with her back towards her husband, fidgetting with some papers, trying to compose herself into some semblance of serenity.

She had the satisfaction of knowing that her tirade had left poor Sir Baldwin hopelessly bewildered. He was certainly wishing to goodness that he had never meddled in women's affairs, for such meddling seemed invariably to lead to most unpleasant tantrums.

"Will you leave me here now," she said after awhile, "to receive poor Boadicea? I must prepare her for the ordeal which she will have to go through, poor child."

Sir Baldwin rose somewhat awkwardly. Though he felt rather sheepish and subdued, he had not by any means given up the belief that his plan was an excellent one, and that he was doing the right thing by bringing two young people together who were labouring under a misunderstanding.

He did not suggest that he would go and tell Carrington not to come to St. James's-street to-night. Olive had half hoped that he would do so. She did not dare, however, to make the suggestion herself. Sir Baldwin had a curious disposition, and suspicions

were only dormant in him; they might be aroused at the slightest false move on Olive's part.

She allowed him to go without any further comment.

Then she sat down at her desk, and with her chin resting in her hand she had a good hard "think."

She thought, and thought, and thought for the one way possible out of the terrible plight in which her husband's tactless blunder had placed her.

Should she own to Boadicea that she had told her a lie, or should she persist in the lie, even, if necessary in the face of Lieutenant Carrington's denial? Or would Fate be kind to her and help her effectually to keep those two young people apart?

CHAPTER XXVIII

AN AGREEABLE SURPRISE

The luncheon-bell had just been rung.

Sir Baldwin had joined Lady Jeffreys in the drawing-room, and the solemn butler had thrown the double doors wide open and announced in a cadaverous voice that "Luncheon was served," when the cheerful noise of a fanfare upon a coach-horn rang clearly from the further end of the aristocratic street.

"Your guest, Sir Baldwin," said Olive drily. "We must wait now until my sister has had time to tidy herself after her journey."

She sat down and took up a fashion paper, seeming absorbed in her reading and totally indifferent to the rattle of coach wheels, the clatter of horses' hoofs on the stone pavement, the jingle of harness and shouts of ostlers and grooms, as Sir Baldwin's heavy travelling coach swung round the corner from Piccadilly and came to a halt with magnificent precision immediately in front of the stately front door of the Jeffreys' town mansion.

Sir Baldwin seemed agitated. He did not go to the window to see the arrival, but walked up and down the room, with his hands behind his back, and his eyes wandering from time to time furtively in the direction of his wife.

"I shall have to put luncheon back at least half an

hour," said Olive coolly, as she stretched her shapely arm toward the bell. "From the noise that is going on outside I imagine that Boadicea has brought either an enormous quantity of luggage with her or else some members of the Thanet household."

There certainly was an extraordinary amount of noise going on outside. Half a dozen people seemed to be talking at one and the same time and at the top of their voices. Sir Baldwin apparently had some misgivings on the subject, for he went to the door and opened it.

All doubts were set at rest then and there, for Aunt Caroline's shrill voice, giving confused directions anent a multitude of boxes, was quite unmistakable, and two or three other voices also rose from below. Sir Baldwin turned rather sheepishly toward his wife.

"They've come, my dear," he said haltingly.

"You mean that my sister has come, do you not, Sir Baldwin?" rejoined Olive, who seemed unaccountably absorbed in the perusal of her fashion paper. "Will you not go down and receive her? She is more your guest than mine, you know."

"I mean, my dear . . . er . . . that is . . . they all seem to have come. . . ."

Sir Baldwin felt distinctly at a disadvantage, and knew that his wife was laughing at him. She was not likely under the circumstances to help him out of a very awkward situation which he certainly had never foreseen.

He had looked forward to Boadicea's visit, but the entire family, including Cousin Barnaby, installed per-

haps for an indefinite time in a London house was more than he had bargained for.

The well-drilled footman now appeared on the landing. His face, set on approved conventional lines, betrayed nothing of what he thought of the remarkable visitors that were trooping up the stairs at his heels. It certainly betrayed nothing of what he would say presently in the servants' hall on that subject.

With scanty ceremony, Aunt Caroline, who was leading the little party, pushed the solemn footman out of her way. In one hand she had a bandbox which contained her best bonnet, and in the other she carried a gargantuan umbrella, and a small cardboard box on which was displayed the legend: "Eggs. With care."

"Here we are, my dear Sir Baldwin!" she said cheerfully. "And right glad to see something of London. I cannot shake hands till I have put some of these things down. Here, young fellow," she added, turning to the solemn footman, who stood there in resplendent livery, "take these, and be careful not to drop this box; there are three turkey's eggs in it."

She thrust umbrella and egg-box into the hands of the highly indignant footman, deposited her bandbox on the floor, shook Sir Baldwin vigorously by the hand, and with a perfectly self-possessed "Come along, Barnaby!" she marched straight into the drawing-room.

Olive rose languidly to receive her, but Aunt Caroline was always self-possessed and always at her ease.

She was quite unconscious of the coolness of the reception or of Sir Baldwin's embarrassment.

"So kind of Sir Baldwin to ask us," she said with the same persistent cheerfulness, after she had deposited two well-sounding kisses on Olive's delicately rouged cheeks.

She undid her bonnet strings and sat down with an obvious sense of satisfaction. Cousin Barnaby had entered in her wake, also Uncle Jasper. The latter had his tin specimen-case slung round his shoulder, and clung to his butterfly-net with an obvious sense of security. He was smiling benignly on the world in general, and his eyes had already fastened themselves on a glass case which adorned one of the walls, and which contained a fine stuffed eagle, the product of one of Sir Baldwin's shooting expeditions in the north of Scotland.

Cousin Barnaby, muffled up to the eyes, had a rug over one arm and a travelling pillow in his hand; he made somewhat gauche efforts at greeting Sir Baldwin and Lady Jeffreys in a becoming manner.

"So you see, my darling Olive, here we are!" said Aunt Caroline airily, when she was satisfied that her little party had all assembled; Cousin Barnaby and Uncle Jasper in the drawing-room, Boadicea talking to Sir Baldwin, and Susan still on the landing. "I could not allow the child to travel alone, could I?"

"No, no, Aunt, of course not," assented Olive, who was feeling almost hysterical with an access of rage mingling with one of uncontrollable laughter. Really the situation was almost too funny to be infuriating, and too infuriating to be genuinely funny.

And Sir Baldwin — the creator of this stupid, insane, idiotic plight into which he had placed his wife as well as himself — looked the picture of hopeless bewilderment.

It was enough to send any woman, suffering already from nerves, clean out of her senses.

"Your arrival is a charming surprise for my birthday," she said with bitter irony, which was wholly lost on Aunt Caroline, but not on Sir Baldwin. "I am delighted to see you . . . and dear Uncle Jasper."

"Well," said Aunt Caroline complacently, "I could not very well allow your uncle to stay in the house alone . . . and Susan such a careless minx . . ."

"Of course not . . . of course not . . . dear Uncle Jasper . . . this is really a surprise. . . . Is it not, Sir Baldwin? . . . You could not have given me a more delightful surprise for my birthday . . . could you?"

"How de do, Mr. Hemingford . . . very pleased to see you," murmured Sir Baldwin.

"How de do," responded Uncle Jasper. "Er . . . er . . . mayhap you could tell me the way to the Royal Society's museum, my dear Olive . . . I have heard that there is a wonderful collection there of British song birds. . . ."

"Yes, yes, Uncle Jasper, there is . . . and Sir Baldwin will take an early opportunity of taking you there, will you not, Sir Baldwin?"

"Of course, of course!"

"And fancy Cousin Barnaby making up his mind to pay us townsfolk a visit," said Olive, who was approaching nearer and nearer to the verge of hysteria,

and talked glibly and gaily in a very loud, high-pitched voice.

Aunt Caroline, a little shame-faced, was smoothing out her bonnet strings.

"I could not very well allow Barnaby to . . . er . . ." she muttered, "to . . ."

"I could not allow you, Caroline, to leave me alone in the house," rejoined Mr. Crabtree, settling himself down placidly in a corner of the sofa; "you are well aware of the fact that I could not remain unattended in an empty house. The matter was fully discussed before we left."

"Besides which," said Olive, "my birthday surprise would not have been complete without you, dear Cousin Barnaby. And Sir Baldwin would have been so disappointed if you had not come. Would you not, Sir Baldwin?"

"Certainly, certainly!" murmured the unfortunate man.

"Lis liten generat," said Uncle Jasper calmly.

"Jasper even brought his abominable Latin away with him," said Mr. Crabtree, "and we found that there would be less inconvenience for me to undertake this tiresome journey than to be left alone in company with Caroline's clucking hens."

"But what about Susan?" asked Olive.

"Oh, we brought her along with us," replied Aunt Caroline.

"She had to see after my bed warmer," said Cousin Barnaby in tone of stern reminder.

"Of course she has. I had nearly forgotten. And also she had to complete the birthday surprise! It is

all too delightful, and I don't know how to thank Sir Baldwin for his kindness in thinking out all the details of this delightful visit."

"But where is Boadicea?" interposed Aunt Caroline.

"On the landing. Sitting on her boxes!" rejoined Mr. Crabtree airily.

Everyone had forgotten little Boadicea. Sir Baldwin had greeted her kindly, but she did not follow Aunt Caroline into the drawing-room. She had just caught sight of her sister — beautiful as usual, exquisitely dressed, angered at this invasion of her fashionable house by this set of country bumpkins, but otherwise perfectly serene — and the sight of Olive's face, of those lips that had lied, those eyes that had so cruelly deceived, brought back in a moment all the acuteness of the heart ache which had become almost numb in the past few months.

Boadicea would at that moment have given all she had in the world to be allowed to run away from here at once, to go back to lonely sea-girt Thanet, to the old house and the orchard, which were so full of memories, but also so full of peace. She could not then have come forward to greet her sister, to kiss her again, to lie by word and look again and again.

Nor was Olive any more eager to greet her. She had caught sight of the little face, so pale now, so different to the childish face of a year ago. It looked almost wan and quite tiny, with bloodless cheeks and eyes that seemed unnaturally large. After that quick exchange of looks the sisters, by tacit consent, turned away one from the other. On the pretext of giving a

few final directions to Susan, Boadicea went back on to the landing, and for the moment, luckily, both Sir Baldwin and Olive were far too deeply absorbed in a ridiculous situation to pay much attention to her.

She was very tired, so she sat down quietly on one of Aunt Caroline's boxes, and waited patiently for the time when some degree of silence would follow the present babel of talk and of hysterical laughter, and in the meanwhile screwing up her courage for the ordeal of meeting Olive — as she would have to do presently — just as if nothing had happened either to wreck her life or to destroy her illusions.

In a moment of impulse she had decided to come to London because Sir Baldwin had written to say that Olive was ill, and at that thought all the old fondness for the beautiful sister had revived. She had come feeling that Olive was ill and had need of her. If Olive had been really ill, Boadicea could have found it in her heart to forget and to forgive everything; but Olive was not ill and had no need of a sister's sympathy, and in her eyes there was just that look of hard selfishness which Boadicea had discovered in them on that one hideous afternoon when all the world suddenly became black and ugly with the stains of sin and deceit.

CHAPTER XXIX

AN AWKWARD SITUATION

THERE was grave consultation with Thompson, the majordomo of Lady Jeffreys's household, as to how the unexpected guests were to be housed.

Though the mansion was fairly large and roomy, there was no superabundance of space in it, and, as in most London houses, there were but few spare bedrooms. Thompson gravely shook his head when her ladyship asked him what rooms could be placed at the disposal of Sir Baldwin's guests.

"If you please, my lady," he said, "there is only the blue room free now. We thought that Miss Aldmarshe alone was coming."

"Only the blue room?"

"That's all, my lady. Miss Aldmarshe can then have the small green room on the east side."

"And," interposed Mr. Crabtree quietly, "Caroline and Jasper can go to an adjacent hotel."

"To an hotel," exclaimed Aunt Caroline, a little horrified at the proposal.

"Yes," interposed Uncle Jasper, with alacrity, "somewhere near the Royal Society's museum. . . ."

"Shall I tell Cutler, my lady, that that arrangement will suit?" asked Thompson, who was showing a lofty contempt for these savages from the country.

"Yes. Send her down here to me."

Thompson retired and Mr. Crabtree concluded with perfect complacency:

"The blue room will do very well for me . . . though I must tell you, Olive, that I hate blue. . . ."

"But, Cousin Barnaby," protested Olive, "I have only the one room, and Aunt Caroline . . ."

"She can sleep at the hotel with Jasper, of course . . . and I can make the blue room do . . ."

"But really, Cousin Barnaby . . ."

"No matter," he interposed loftily. "I can make it do. Don't apologise. . . . I hate blue, but I can make it do."

Cutler, the housekeeper, in splendid black silk and lace-edged apron, was already at the door ready to confirm Thompson's assertion that no other room but the blue one would be available, and Miss Aldmarshe would then have to have the smaller green room on the east side.

Aunt Caroline thought that the majestic housekeeper looked a pert minx, and tried to tell her so by a withering look. Mr. Crabtree had risen from the sofa. Totally unawed by the glance of contemptuous astonishment which Cutler threw at him, he stalked up to her, rug and travelling-pillow in hand. Without more ado he thrust these things into the indignant housekeeper's arms.

"Here, woman, take my things into the blue room," he said.

Poor Cutler nearly dropped the things on to the floor. She had never been so insulted in all her life. Nothing but respect for her master and mistress prevented her making a scene then and there, and in her

mind she determined that if these people stayed more than one night in the house she herself would promptly give a month's notice. For the moment she vainly looked to Sir Baldwin — whom she had served faithfully for twenty years — for support against this insult.

"Mr. Crabtree," said Sir Baldwin, somewhat feebly, for, poor man, his spirits had been somewhat cowed during the past half hour —"Mr. Crabtree, I really must ask you to . . ."

"Don't apologise, don't apologise!" broke in Cousin Barnaby in his usual summary manner. "I hate blue, but I can stand it for a few days. Let your woman show the way. Get along, girl, can't you?"

"What am I to do, my lady?" asked Cutler, who was on the point of bursting into tears.

"Show me the way to the blue room, and don't argue," concluded Mr. Crabtree.

It is a very curious fact in life that very selfish and very self-assertive persons invariably succeed in imposing their wishes on others. In this case Mr. Crabtree had it entirely his own way. Sir Baldwin felt far too bewildered and far too sheepish to do his duty as host or master of the house. Olive, on the other hand, was much too resentful and really not in a normal state of mind to attend to the most elementary duties of hospitality towards her uncle and aunt.

Thus the perplexed and irate housekeeper, finding no support from her master or mistress, was obliged to obey that muffled-up scarecrow who insulted her and ordered her about as if she had been a kitchen-maid.

Wrapping herself up in a perfect mantle of offended dignity, she threw one withering glance on Barnaby Crabtree, and asked him, with ironical deference, kindly to follow her up the stairs. This he did quite contentedly, whilst Aunt Caroline said blandly:

"Cousin Barnaby insisted on coming, you know, my dear Olive; I do hope that it is not inconvenient?"

"Oh, not at all — not at all, my dear Aunt! We are charmed, I assure you. . . . Are we not, Sir Baldwin?"

"Delighted. Delighted, of course!"

"But," rejoined Olive, with a laugh, "unless you and Uncle Jasper will sleep on the drawing-room floor I am afraid that you will have to go to an hotel."

"Somewhere near the Royal Society's museum," murmured Uncle Jasper mildly.

"At any rate, we'll see to that later on. For the moment we must have some luncheon. The bell will ring in a quarter of an hour. Come to my room, Aunt, will you? Sir Baldwin, will you see to Uncle Jasper in the meanwhile?"

"And that poor child!" exclaimed Aunt Caroline, suddenly recollecting Boadicea.

"She is still sitting on her boxes, I suppose."

But Boadicea was no longer on the landing. She and Susan had found their way upstairs. They had enlisted the housekeeper's sympathy, and had been shown into their rooms.

The meeting between the two sisters had again been postponed, but, of course, it could not be put off indefinitely. Olive frowned with impatience at herself for being so strangely disturbed in her younger sis-

ter's presence. She deposited Aunt Caroline in front of a basin full of hot water in her own room, and then deliberately went upstairs to the small green room on the east side which Boadicea would have to occupy, if she stayed in St. James's-street.

She knocked at the door and went in. Boadicea was standing beside her boxes looking listless and apathetic. She made no movement to embrace her sister, and Olive felt strangely ill at ease at sight of the thin, pinched little face so different to the apple-cheeked, rosy one of awhile ago.

Not that there was any feeling of remorse or of shame in her. She was not in the least ashamed of what she had done, either of the lie which she had told or of what that lie implied with regard to herself; nor was she remorseful, for she had no conception of the gravity of her action. Being wholly incapable of deep and passionate attachment, she did not believe in the existence of it. She thought that Boadicea — at most — had had just the same passing fancy for Lieutenant Carrington as she had had herself, that her vanity had been agreeably tickled by the young man's attentions, and that a sense of pique and of disappointment was all that the young girl could possibly feel at the present moment.

Not anything to make a fuss over, surely.

She thought that the child was exhibiting a sulkiness of temper altogether unwarranted under the circumstances, and it was almost with a feeling of aggrieved dignity that she said:

"Good gracious, child, are you so tired as all that? You don't seem overjoyed at seeing me."

She made pretence to kiss Boadicea with some show of affection, and immediately afterwards began to talk glibly of the present ridiculous situation.

"It is quite intolerable. You see that for yourself, don't you, little one?" she said. "I am, of course, delighted to have you, but what in the world shall I do with Aunt and Uncle, and that odious Crabtree? I haven't the room in this house, and Barnaby will upset all my servants."

"I am very sorry, Olive," said Boadicea, and for the first time for many months a twinkle of amusement crept into her large, purple-circled eyes. "I did what I could to stop the crowd of us coming all together. But Aunt made all the arrangements. . . . I was not allowed to speak a word."

"Aunt is really in her dotage. As for Uncle, he has no business to be let loose in London like that."

"Aunt will do her best to look after him."

"They'll both come to grief in London," was Olive's decided pronouncement. "And I am obliged to send them to an hotel where Aunt will quarrel with the chambermaid and the head waiter and set the management by the ears. As for paying her bill without a terrible row with the cashier, she is simply incapable of it. Little one, I am very, very sorry, but much as I would like to have you here with me, I honestly think that it is your duty to go to the hotel with them."

"Yes, Olive?"

"You will have to come back to me later on in the season; and then I must see that you come alone. Your visit this time has been spoilt, anyhow; and I do

think that it is not safe for Aunt and Uncle to be alone in a London hotel."

Boadicea cared so little as to where she went or what she did, that she acquiesced readily in her sister's wish.

"I won't unpack my box, then," she said simply, "and after luncheon we can all go to some hotel near the Museum, as Uncle Jasper wishes."

"Yes, dear. And I wouldn't stay in London longer than a few days. You could easily make Aunt understand that London does not agree with you. And then, you see, little one, the sooner you and the family go back this time, the sooner you can return to me, say, at the beginning of July, when the season is still at its height, and we can spend a nice time together."

Boadicea could not help smiling, in spite of the pain which Olive was causing her by her shallow pretences. Oh, how well she had learnt to read in her sister's heart! How clearly she saw the deceit that pierced through this show of affection! She knew that Olive no more meant what she said, no more meant her to come back to London this year or any other year than she had done in the years that were past.

"You need not be afraid, Olive," she said, gently. "I won't stay in London a day longer than I can help."

"My dear child . . ."

"No, no, dear! Never mind about trying to protest what you don't feel. It's no good, Olive, things will never be quite the same between us as they were in the past."

"You are such a country ninny, child. You judge

me harshly because of what I told you. Why, every woman in London — if she be good-looking — has more than one lover. Let me tell you that, and no one thinks any the worse of her for that."

"I am not judging you, Olive, or thinking harshly of you. I only judge myself for having been silly and vanity-stricken. But don't let us talk about all that. It is all over and done with."

"That is a very sensible way of looking at it, child. It is all over and done with, as you say. Lieutenant Carrington has forgotten all about you by now, I dare say, and you are very wise to forget all about him. And you are sure you don't mind going to an hotel with Aunt and Uncle?"

"Of course I don't mind."

"And after to-day you must all come over for meals. To-night, I am sorry to say, I shall not be able to entertain you. I have a dinner-party first and go to a rout afterwards. You wouldn't care for either, would you, dear?"

"No, Olive, I should not."

"Then perhaps we can arrange for you to leave London to-morrow. Sir Baldwin has any number of horses in town. I am sure that he will readily send you back in his coach."

"It would be very kind of him."

"And, really, dear, I ask you, in all fairness, what could I do with that odious Crabtree for more than one day?"

The luncheon-bell sounded now for the second time. Boadicea had already smoothed her hair and washed her face and hands. She was quite ready to go down-

stairs with her sister. On the whole she was not greatly hurt at her sister's obvious desire to be rid of her again as quickly as possible. Was she herself not conscious of a strong desire to put mile upon mile of road between her and Olive?

She had only come because she believed that Olive was ill. Now she realised how impossible it would be for her to be constantly with her sister day after day, in the same house, at meals, at all times.

But Olive was triumphant. Her strategy had succeeded beyond her fondest hopes. Sir Baldwin's clumsy plan had been most cleverly outwitted, and if Lieutenant Carrington, acting upon the hint dropped to him, did turn up at sunset this evening, it would become a very easy matter indeed to persuade him that Boadicea had fled because of his approach. In fact, chance had been so kind that she had arranged the situation altogether for the best.

Boadicea in London and to all appearances refusing to meet Lieutenant Carrington, was a far more satisfactory asset in Olive's schemes than she had been in distant Thanet.

Olive was quite longing for Jack's visit this evening; there would be no need for him now to go to the China seas. He could accept the appointment at the Admiralty and remain in London, worshipping comfortably at the feet of beautiful Lady Jeffreys, for she would make him understand how thoroughly at an end was that silly romance, which — surely against his own will and judgment — had kept him bound in a cold spirit of chivalry to the little savage whom he had met in Thanet.

CHAPTER XXX

AN HONEST MAN

After luncheon Mr. Crabtree retired to the blue room for rest until tea-time. He hated blue, but professed himself willing to sacrifice his prejudices for the sake of peace, which he hoped to find in London.

It was arranged that Sir Baldwin's barouche would conduct the rest of the Thanet party to a good hotel in the neighbourhood of the Royal Society's museum, which was situated at some little distance from St. James's-street, and Olive — an irreproachably charming hostess now, full of spirits and brimming over with smiles — was dispensing coffee in the drawing-room whilst waiting for the advent of the barouche.

No wonder that she was in a good humour. In less than a quarter of an hour from now Boadicea would be safely out of the house, after which the manœuvring of keeping her and Lieutenant Jack apart for a day or two longer would become a very simple matter. No one had mentioned Lieutenant Carrington at luncheon, and now Aunt Caroline and Boadicea had their bonnets on, ready to start, and if all went well the whole party would have left London in less than forty-eight hours from now.

Sir Baldwin was making vigorous efforts to entertain Uncle Jasper with travellers' tales. Aunt Caro-

line talked volubly and incessantly whilst stirring her coffee.

She talked of Susan's misdeeds, of jams and of pickles, of Topcoat's rheumatism, and Mr. Friday, the Minster grocer's bankruptcy. Finally, she talked of Boadicea's lack of appetite, which had sat heavily on her own mind of late.

"But now," she said cheerfully, "that she will be near you, Olive, I dare say that the roses will soon return to her cheeks. Not that I believe in London air, mind you, but I have done my best with her, giving her dandelion tea and liquorice, before every meal, and no woman can do more."

"But I am very well, Aunt," said Boadicea in that listless way which seemed to have become habitual with her. "I am sure that I have no need of physic."

Whereupon Sir Baldwin broke off in his conversation with Uncle Jasper, and said tartly, his temper being none of the best by now:

"The physic the chit wants is a contented mind."

"Good, Sir Baldwin!" protested Aunt Caroline.

"Aye, you'll have to excuse me, ma'am!" he continued, speaking loudly and bluntly. "I had intended speaking straight words to the minx when she came. It is time, I say, that heartless coquettes heard the truth spoken openly to them by honest men."

"Pay no attention, Aunt," interposed Olive hastily, for she did not like the turn which the conversation had taken so unexpectedly. "Sir Baldwin is aiming a shaft at me: a pleasing practice to which he is often addicted."

Then she turned with a sad and patient smile to her sister.

"Dear child," she said, sighing prettily, "I hope for your sake that you will never be plagued with a jealous husband."

But Boadicea replied very earnestly, and turning large, sad eyes on Sir Baldwin:

"No, no, Olive! Sir Baldwin is quite right in what he says, though of course he does not understand."

"Understand?" exclaimed Sir Baldwin hotly. "What is there to understand, if you please, save that like a wanton chit you amused yourself by toying with the love of an honest man, and now go about your business smiling and contented whilst he is breaking his heart?"

"Breaking his heart?" she protested, with a contemptuous shrug of the shoulders. "Oh, as to that . . ."

"Well, you know, child," broke in Aunt Caroline, with her usual complacency, "I have always told you that you did not treat Lieutenant Carrington quite fairly."

"For gracious' sake," cried Olive, with angry impatience, "do not revive that old, forgotten story now, Aunt. It is all past and forgotten. It certainly did not redound to anybody's credit, so I really do not see why you should wish to dig it up again."

"The story is not past and forgotten," protested Sir Baldwin vigorously.

"At any rate, it never concerned you, Sir Baldwin."

"A story of that type concerns every honest man."

"There's too much talk of honest men, it seems to

me," concluded Olive, trying to conceal beneath the appearance of indifference, the fear and anger which she now felt. "Good wine needs no bush. Moreover, the barouche is at the door."

"It can wait," rejoined Sir Baldwin curtly; "at any rate, until I, too, have told Miss Boadicea that she did not treat Lieutenant Carrington fairly. Fairly!" he reiterated, with a suppressed oath. "Heaven's sakes alive, girl! Is it fair to send such heartless messages to a man so sorely stricken with grief already?"

"Sir Baldwin," said Olive in a harsh, high-pitched voice, "I must insist on your ceasing to interfere in my sister's affairs."

But Boadicea, very bewildered, had frowned in obvious puzzlement, and was murmuring:

"Messages? What messages?"

She gazed inquiringly from her sister to Sir Baldwin, and then back to her sister again. Olive was flushed and looked more and more angered, her eyes, too, appeared restless, avoiding Boadicea's direct gaze. Something of the truth — a mere glimmer, of course — struggled to the young girl's comprehension. There was no mistaking Olive's furtive looks, and Sir Baldwin seemed very sure of his assertion.

"In your letters to your sister," he said hotly, "your messages were positively heartless. How many times did you send Carrington a message, pray, saying that you never wish to look on his face again?"

"Poor young man," murmured Aunt Caroline, "why did you say that, child?"

"I . . . don't know . . ." said Boadicea slowly, for she was beginning to understand that some kind

of treachery had been at work. What it was or who had been guilty, and for what object she could not at present conceive, but Olive looked frightened, as she had done on that memorable evening a year ago, and Boadicea now, as then, was far too loyal to give her away.

"You don't know?" queried Sir Baldwin.

"Sir Baldwin," protested Olive, "the barouche is at the door. This is not the time . . ."

But Sir Baldwin once launched on the subject which he had so much at heart, was not in a humour to be interrupted. He turned to Boadicea and once more demanded sternly:

"You don't know?"

"I had forgotten," she replied meekly.

"Forgotten, have you?" he retorted. "Lord bless my soul, girl, have you no heart, no feeling, no honest sentiment in you? And you a mere child, and already so versed in the perverse arts of wanton coquettes!"

"Sir Baldwin . . ." cried Olive.

"Let me talk to her, I tell you. I must talk to her, and she has got to listen. It is time someone spoke a brave mind to her. You, Miss Boadicea, have broken an honest man's heart, let me tell you that. You have ruined his hopes and blighted his career. He is in London at the present moment looking the very wreck of his former self, old before his time, sober in mien, pale and gnawed by fever. He had to be invalided home from Malta. He, a young man, not eight-and-twenty, who should enjoy the best of healths. All that is your work, let me tell you. Yours, and you don't seem to care! You calmly say that you never

wish to see his face again. Well, you won't, for he will be underground before you have time to repent of your heartlessness. Next week he sails for the China seas, far away from home, from kindred, and from friends. In his present state of apathy and feeble health, I doubt if he will ever come back from there. Shame on you, child, I say — shame on you! If you have no pity on a man whose life you have ruined, at least you must have shame for your unwarrantable conduct. What harm had he done you? What sin had he committed? And now, when a poor, innocent man's heart is broken by your indifference and your cruelty, you stand calmly here and say stolidly, 'I do not know — I had forgotten!' Shame, I say — shame!"

Sir Baldwin Jeffreys had worked himself up into a violent state of anger — a state which rendered him unusually persuasive and eloquent. Olive had once or twice during his loudly-spoken tirade endeavoured to stop his flow of eloquence, but in vain. He was just letting himself go. He had in many ways suffered as much as the man whose cause he was pleading. He, too, had been treated with cruel indifference, mocked at, ignored, deeply wronged, and it was his own grievances so long held secret in his heart that gushed forth now clothed in vigorous words.

Olive had become pale to the lips. She would — if she could then have done it — have annihilated her meddlesome husband, with her looks of anger bordering on absolute hatred. The crisis, which she had really hoped would now be avoided, was being precipitated by what she termed Sir Baldwin's impudent in-

terference. An explanation with Boadicea would now, she feared, be inevitable, and what the outcome of that would be she hardly dared to guess.

"'Twas well said, Sir Baldwin," said Aunt Caroline, with her usual cheerful complacency. "I've been much too weak all this time past, else I would have given her a good straight talk myself."

"I thank you for what you have said, Sir Baldwin," said Boadicea coldly. "But unfortunately what is done cannot now be undone."

"It can be mended, at any rate," he retorted.

"How?"

"You talk it over with your sister. She understands young men and their ways. She'll be of good counsel to you, eh, Olive?"

"Yes, yes, of course. I'll talk it all over with Boadicea some time," said Olive impatiently; "but surely not now when the barouche is at the door. Unless they go soon to seek for rooms, every decent hotel will be closed against them. Hotel-keepers have no liking for travellers who arrive too late."

"Yes, yes," said Aunt Caroline, "let us go now, Sir Baldwin, we may have to visit several hotels before we find suitable rooms. I must be on the south side, you know, because of my asthma."

"Yes, yes," assented Sir Baldwin, "I will accompany you, ma'am, if you will allow me, on your tour of inspection. Our desire would have been to entertain you here, you know, only that Mr. Crabtree has unfortunately interfered with that pleasant arrangement."

"He would come, dear Sir Baldwin, though I tried

to persuade him to return to his sister's, poor dear, who usually looks after him, and who is glad, I dare swear, to be rid of him for a while. However, he simply insisted on coming with us. But never you worry about it, Sir Baldwin, your uncle and I will do very well in lodgings, now that Boadicea has also decided on being with us. Eh, Jasper? Do set Sir Baldwin's mind at ease, and tell him that we shall do very well in lodgings."

Thus roused from the perusal of a book which he had surreptitiously concealed in his pocket at the last moment when leaving home, Uncle Jasper assented meekly:

"Somewhere near the Royal Society's museum," he said.

"We'll find something close by, at any rate," concluded Sir Baldwin.

He rang the bell, and Thompson, the solemn major-domo, opened the doors for the party to file out.

"We shall be quite comfortable wherever you put us, Sir Baldwin," said Aunt Caroline who had got Uncle Jasper by the arm, and was forcibly taking him along. "Are you coming, Boadicea?" she added, turning back to the young girl, who had made no movement to follow.

Boadicea was deliberately undoing her bonnet strings. She looked frail and tired, but very resolute. Olive was watching her with ever-growing apprehension. The inevitable explanation was closer at hand than she had imagined, and it was not likely to prove an easy one for her.

"I think, Aunt, if you will excuse me," said Boadi-

cea, taking off her bonnet and settling down on a corner of the sofa, "I would rather stay with Olive for a little while. Someone no doubt will later on pilot me to the hotel which you will have chosen, once Sir Baldwin returns and tells us where it is."

CHAPTER XXXI

A LITTLE FOOL

SILENCE reigned in the large elegantly-furnished drawing-room of the stately house in St. James's-street. The party from Thanet was heard descending the stairs, and presently entering the barouche and being driven away in the direction of Piccadilly.

Olive was at the window, with her back towards her sister, apparently deeply immersed in watching Aunt Caroline and Uncle Jasper and after them Sir Baldwin — finally followed by Susan — getting into the carriage; but in reality she was wondering in her own mind how in the world she could get out of the present extremely uncomfortable situation without too much hurt to her vanity and to her self-esteem.

Boadicea still sat on the corner of the sofa, very still, with her hands folded in her lap and her eyes fixed upon her sister, as if from right through the back of Olive's head she would wish to extract the solution of that riddle which was puzzling her own mind so painfully.

The silence became oppressive.

With a forced little laugh Olive suddenly turned and faced Boadicea.

"Thank goodness!" she said lightly, "they have driven off at last. Some of that eloquent sermon was, of course, meant for me. Oh, dear me, what we poor

women have to suffer when we are bound for life to a veritable walking dictionary of whole-hearted abuse."

She yawned affectedly, and, going to the nearest, most conveniently placed mirror, she readjusted the curls of her elaborate chignon.

"Well, child," she said after awhile, "I am afraid that you have not chosen the most pleasant way of spending your first afternoon in London! I am truly sorry, but I cannot possibly entertain you. I have promised to put in an appearance at Lady Malvern's concert this afternoon, and it is already unconscionably late. I must go and put on my hat now. Will you wait for me here till I come down again?"

"Don't go yet, Olive," said Boadicea, with a wistful little tone of entreaty. "I want to ask you something."

"Well, what is it?" queried Olive, with an indifference which she was very far from feeling. She was wishing with all her might that some one or other of her numerous fashionable friends would take this opportunity of paying her an afternoon call and interrupt this unpleasant *tête-a-tête*. On most days during the season her drawing-room was filled with visitors who were not always welcome. It was more than provoking, therefore, that just to-day, when she pined for interruption, she should be left so severely alone.

Across the younger girl's smooth forehead there had appeared a deep frown of puzzlement.

"What did Sir Baldwin mean," she asked, "about those messages which he says I sent to — to Lieutenant Carrington?"

"I am sure I don't know, child," replied Olive impatiently. "How should I? Sir Baldwin was talking at random. He often does when he has an imaginary grievance against me."

"But Sir Baldwin said that my messages were sent in my letters to you."

"Well, yes, he did say that. I tell you, child, that he was talking at random."

"Yes, now! But, then?"

"What do you mean by 'then'?"

"When those messages were delivered to Lieutenant Carrington: was someone talking at random then?"

"Oh," said Olive, with yet a greater show of indifference, "I thought that surely you would not wish to see Lieutenant Carrington."

"Why not?"

"It seems to me that your own good sense ought to tell you why not. I should have imagined that you would see for yourself that an interview could not possibly lead to anything, but would only be painful to you both."

"An interview? Sir Baldwin did say something about my refusing to see Lieutenant Carrington. Had he asked for an interview then?"

"Well, he did say something about it. But really, child, I haven't got the time to waste over all this silly talk. I am due at Lady Malvern's now."

"One moment, Olive. I won't keep you long. You have just told me that Lieutenant Carrington said something about an interview. What did he say?"

"He only spoke vaguely, I tell you."

"But you were not going to tell me anything about it?"

Olive was getting nervous and fidgetty. This close questioning under her younger sister's calm gaze had taken all her self-assurance from her. Yet, strangely enough, she made no attempt to run away. Instinctively she felt that the situation had become so acute, and Boadicea so determined, that to evade both would only mean disaster to herself, to all her desires and, above all, to her position before her sister, before Jack, and even perhaps before her husband.

On the whole she thought it best to hold her ground now, trusting to her kind ally Chance, and to her own wits to lead her triumphantly out of this unpleasant if temporary *cul-de-sac*.

"You took it upon yourself to refuse him then and there in my name?" asked Boadicea, whose voice had suddenly become hard and trenchant even as her face became more calm and set. "You took it upon yourself without consulting me?"

"I thought it best," retorted Olive boldly, "so did Sir Baldwin at the time. He was present when Lieutenant Carrington made his request, and we both thought . . ."

Boadicea quickly interrupted her.

"His request?" she said. "He did request an interview then? Just now you said that he merely spoke vaguely about it."

"Tush, child!" said Olive, with angry impatience. "I'll not be cross-examined like this! The whole thing only amounts to a row of pins, and why you should make such a fuss now and behave so rudely to

me, I can't think. Lieutenant Carrington did make the suggestion that an interview between him and you might be desirable before he left for China. Sir Baldwin was present at the time, as I told you, and so . . ."

"And so you told a lie," broke in Boadicea calmly.

"Pshaw! . . . What would be the good of such an interview?"

"I don't know. Lieutenant Carrington may really be puzzled at my attitude towards him. He may not have understood things clearly, and may have wished for an explanation."

"What nonsense, child! You are a regular country ninny! Lieutenant Carrington knows as well as you and I the real cause of the rupture between you."

"He knows? . . . That you have told me? . . ."

"Or that you guessed . . ."

"That he had been your . . ."

"Why . . . yes. . . ."

"One does not guess such things all of a sudden. . . . If one guessed one would wish to make sure."

"That's just it. Lieutenant Carrington, I think, only wanted to assure himself that you were not quite sure."

"Then he really wished for that interview?"

"Only because of that, I think."

"And was he disappointed at your refusal?"

"I don't think so."

"But Sir Baldwin said just now that he had never seen a man so broken-hearted and so altered in appearance as was Lieutenant Carrington. . . . Why do you go on lying to me, Olive?"

"Bah, child!" retorted Olive in uncontrolled exasperation. "You are excited and very impertinent. I really have no time to listen to all this nonsense. I am over late now for Lady Malvern's concert. You have really been too provoking."

"I am sorry, Olive," rejoined the young girl quietly. "Do go and put on your hat now. I won't detain you any longer."

"Ah, that's better! Really you have been very exasperating, child, keeping me here all this while with all that senseless talk. What will you do with yourself while I am gone?"

"I'll wait for Sir Baldwin."

"And then?"

"Ask him to kindly take a message from me to Lieutenant Carrington."

"A message? What message?"

"That I will grant him the interview which he desires."

"Oh, he no longer desires it!"

"Perhaps not. But I do!"

"My dear child! You cannot ask for an interview with a gentleman. It would be a most improper thing to do."

"Then I'll do an improper thing."

"Listen to me, child . . ." urged Olive, whose nervous excitement was growing with every new phase of her sister's sudden determination.

"I'll not listen to you, Olive," replied Boadicea. "I'll wait for Sir Baldwin. You go and get your hat on, or you'll be late for Lady Malvern's concert."

"But, my dear child, Sir Baldwin won't be able to help you."

"Why not?"

"He does not know where Lieutenant Carrington lodges. He cannot go and look for him in the London streets."

"I'll write a letter to Lieutenant Carrington, and Sir Baldwin will give it to him when next he sees him."

"Sir Baldwin is not the proper person to deliver a young girl's letter to another man."

"I think that Sir Baldwin would be willing for once to override the conventions."

"Moreover, it's too late, anyway. Lieutenant Carrington leaves London to-night and England to-morrow."

"Then my letter addressed to *H.M.S. Dolphin* will reach him without fail."

"Too late for the interview which you seem to desire," cried Olive, with a mighty effort at self-restraint.

"But not too late for him to hear the truth," retorted Boadicea simply.

"The truth? What truth?"

Boadicea had risen. Looking round the room she saw the bureau that stood at one angle, with blotter, pen and ink and sandbox ready to hand. She walked quietly up to the bureau, and sat down in front of it, Olive watching her the while with eyes that looked black with anger, and with a sense of impotence and of fear.

Boadicea opened the blotter, found paper and envelope, and taking up a pen she began to write.

"Lieutenant Carrington may be killed in some engagement," she said quietly, even whilst the sound of her pen scraping against the paper set every one of Olive's nerves tingling. "He must not die under the misapprehension that I do not know the truth."

The callousness — not to say the effrontery of this pronouncement on the part of her young, unsophisticated sister, struck Olive dumb with amazement. She stood there in the middle of the room almost like a person dazed with a sudden blow on the head. Her wide-open eyes watched as if fascinated with the horror of it, her sister's small, sun-tanned hand running rapidly from left to right of the sheet of notepaper in front of her. The scraping of the quill pen alone disturbed the silence that had fallen between these two women; outside cabriolets and barouches rattled along the stone pavement, street-criers proclaimed their wares: "Sweet lavender! Won't you buy sweet lavender?" or "Knives and scissors to grind!" or "All a-blowin' and a-growin'."

People went about on their business or their pleasure, the indifferent, the gay, the sad, they all went on just the same, whilst one sister in her innocence was calmly writing the condemnation of the other.

It was some time before Olive could again trust herself to speak, and even then her voice sounded harsh and hollow, as if her throat were parched.

And by that time the letter was nearly finished.

"Are you . . . are you telling Lieutenant Carrington the reason why you broke your engagement off with him?" she asked at last.

"Certainly!" replied the other, without looking up from her writing.

"That . . . that you knew that his relations with me . . . had not been quite . . . quite innocent?"

"Yes!"

"And that I had told you so?"

"That you had confessed this to me. Yes . . . I am telling him that."

"And you propose to entrust a letter like that — a letter which would compromise me hopelessly . . . you propose to entrust it to Sir Baldwin?" stammered Olive, who now was forced to give up all attempt at concealing her own agitation, for she no longer could control her voice, which was trembling, or her blood, which fled from her cheeks and left them visibly grey even beneath the delicate coating of rouge.

"It is monstrous . . . abominable . . ." she gasped and incontinently burst into tears.

But Boadicea finished her letter very calmly. She signed her name boldly and with an elegant flourish, then she addressed the envelope, and finally strewed sand over the wet ink.

"Don't disturb yourself, Olive dear," she said quietly, and — her sister thought — very callously. "Sir Baldwin is an honourable gentleman. I will close and seal the envelope myself; he would never think of tampering with a closed letter."

"Oh, you never know what Sir Baldwin might or might not do!" said Olive through her tears. "His jealousy is always there; even when it seems quite dormant the merest suspicion calls it back to life."

"You need not worry, dear; I have so worded the

letter that no one but Lieutenant Carrington himself could read your name between the lines."

"You don't know Sir Baldwin as I do."

Boadicea was even now folding the letter, preparatory to slipping it into its envelope. She paused in the act, and, rising from her chair, she turned quickly towards her sister.

"Would you like to see the letter?" she asked.

The change of front was so sudden, the suggestion so unexpected that for the moment Olive was quite thrown off her balance. The blood rushed back to her cheeks. She was alternately pale and then flushed, and her eyes gave a quick flash of eagerness.

But Lady Jeffreys was essentially a woman of the world, and primarily now she was a woman fighting for her own prestige in the eyes of others, and for the realisation of her own desires. If for a moment she had lost control over herself, it was only because every phase of this extraordinary interview with her sister had been so wholly unexpected.

Boadicea within the last quarter of an hour had not only been a totally different woman to the ignorant tomboy whom Olive had known so superficially, but she had been many women in turns. She had been a hard, determined woman, with a cross-examining legal mind; she had been a callous one, unresponsive to the feelings of her sister, of the man whom she had pretended to love; she had been a bold woman, too, for she had done a thing which no young girl with any sense of shame could possibly have done when she wrote what she called "the truth" to a man who in the future would remain an utter stranger to her.

But now equally suddenly the unsophisticated country ninny reappeared. With her own hands she was handing over to her sister the very letter which Olive had every intention should never reach the man for whom it was intended.

No wonder that for a second or two the clever woman of the world was thrown off her balance by this naïve move. But she recovered herself quickly enough, and made no movement to take the letter from her sister.

"Oh, I'll read it if you like!" she said, with perfect indifference.

"Just as you like," rejoined Boadicea, not a whit less self-possessed or less indifferent. "It is no secret from you. If I may, I'll just run up to your room, and put on my bonnet there, in front of your glass. Perhaps Sir Baldwin will have returned by the time I am down again."

Olive took the letter from her. Truly the girl was astonishing — astonishing by her very trustfulness, which, in Olive's opinion, was not far removed from idiocy. She picked up her bonnet, and as she did so she was humming some song or other quietly to herself. She certainly looked a little flushed, but then she had been very pale before, and the argument had been lengthy and exciting.

Olive watched her almost in amazement, whilst twirling between her fingers that compromising letter which had caused her so much agitation, and such unreasoning terror. Boadicea was actually leaving it in her hands, and was preparing to go out of the room with her bonnet swinging by its ribbon on her arm.

"I think I'll take a peep at Cousin Barnaby," she said as she was about to go. "Aunt Caroline will be sure to worry me with questions about him."

"Don't be long, dear," said Olive calmly.

"I shan't be ten minutes. I must just take the ink off my fingers. If you think the letter is all right, will you close it? It is addressed."

And she went out of the room.

Olive could hear her running upstairs to the room immediately overhead, she could hear her open and shut the door of that room, and immediately afterwards handling ewer and basin and singing all the time.

And the letter, with the envelope fully addressed was in Olive's hand. She took it out of the envelope and read it quickly from beginning to end.

And all that she said was:

"The little fool! The little fool!"

CHAPTER XXXII

A STROKE OF DIPLOMACY

And Olive went on repeating those three words: "The little fool!" over and over again to herself. Thus to express her contempt of Boadicea's naïve conduct seemed to ease her mind and to calm her nerves. The fact that the young girl had by that same conduct really played Olive's game for her did not in the least mitigate the latter's contempt.

Thank goodness, that silly letter need never reach Lieutenant Jack now. Olive was twirling and turning it between her fingers, quite enjoying the sudden and unexpected respite from the terrible anxiety of awhile ago.

Overhead she could hear her sister's light footstep moving about the room, and her voice humming one of those eternal old songs of which she was so fond.

"Little fool!" murmured Olive once more, as she folded up the compromising letter and thrust it into the pocket of her gown. "What would Jack have thought of me, if he had read this impudent epistle? . . . For an unsophisticated country wench I must say that my young sister puts matters very clearly."

To have lied on such a subject, and then to be found out in the lie, would have been an humiliation which Lady Jeffreys had hardly dared to contemplate.

She now sat down at the bureau, and drew pen and

paper towards her. The letter which she meant to write needed no great effort in composition. It should be crisp and to the point.

"Miss Aldmarshe desires to inform Lieutenant Carrington that she has no desire for a personal interview with him."

There, nothing could be better! Olive contemplated her handiwork with supreme satisfaction. She had not even taken the trouble to imitate Boadicea's handwriting; to do so would have been both clumsy and unnecessary. All being well, the girl would with her own hands give the letter to Sir Baldwin, who, of course, would transmit it to Lieutenant Carrington this very evening.

"Boadicea gave me this letter for you!" Sir Baldwin would be bound to say that. Olive closing her eyes could picture the whole scene as it would be enacted presently. Sir Baldwin, pompous and correct, handing over the letter, she herself, trying to look calmly sympathetic, whilst Jack, of course, would be somewhat disturbed and even gloomy after he had mastered the contents of the curt epistle.

"She gave you this herself?" he would probably insist. "With her own hands?"

And, of course, Sir Baldwin would be bound to answer "Yes!" to both these questions.

It really was all too delightful and almost funny. Even Olive's somewhat dormant sense of humour woke to the comical side of the situation. And she felt no genuine sympathy for Jack.

"He will have forgotten her in three months," she concluded as she folded up the missive, slipped it

back into the same envelope which had been addressed by Boadicea and finally folded and fastened the whole thing up neatly.

"There's no reason for him to go to the China seas now." And instinctively Olive's fingers went up to the golden curls that needed slight readjustment, and her eyes wandered to the nearest mirror. "That appointment at the Admiralty will keep him in London and . . ."

And at the lady's feet, no doubt. That would be the final outcome of the stormy interview which had ended so satisfactorily.

A few moments later Sir Baldwin's voice was heard down in the hall. A thrill of pleasure went right through Olive's heart; the curtain was about to be raised on one of the most exciting little bits of drama that she had ever witnessed; and the charm of it all was that, though she would be sitting by as an apparently indifferent spectator, she would really be the chief actor, the chief mover in the scene; the other two — Sir Baldwin and Boadicea — would be the marionettes, she — Olive Jeffreys — would be pulling the strings that made those marionettes dance to her tune.

Sir Baldwin came straight upstairs to the drawing-room. He had escorted Aunt Caroline and Uncle Jasper to a nice quiet hotel he knew of in Bloomsbury — The Coptic. He had deposited them there with Susan, and himself had returned in his barouche, which he now wished to place at Boadicea's disposal, that she might rejoin her uncle and aunt.

"It is almost a pity that the child is not going to stop in the house," he said. "Curse that interfering

old Crabtree! She must come back here to-night, though. I have practically arranged that Carrington should be here."

"She has written to Carrington." Olive was quite calm and indifferent. She had Boadicea's letter in her hand and the child was even now coming downstairs.

"Ah! What did she say?"

"Oh, I think she only asks for a few hours' time in which to consider her decision. She probably means to grant Lieutenant Carrington the interview which he desires; but I wouldn't worry her any more just now, Baldwin, if I were you. She seems to have written a nice letter to Jack and if you don't interfere I have no doubt that everything will be for the best. I have her letter here; she shall give it to you herself."

Boadicea, who looked her best just now, with eyes very bright with excitement, and curved lips quivering with eagerness, was even now at the door.

"Here, child, come in," said Olive lightly. "Sir Baldwin thinks he may be seeing Lieutenant Carrington to-day. He can take your letter to him, if you like."

"Yes, Olive. Have you read my letter?"

"I only glanced at it." And Olive was handing the letter to Sir Baldwin, who was about to take it from her when Boadicea put out her hand and quietly took possession of it herself.

"On the whole," she said, "I think I had best not send this letter. If Sir Baldwin will be seeing Lieutenant Carrington to-day, he may as well take a verbal message."

She folded the envelope in half and slipped it into

her pocket. Olive thought that her brain must be reeling. The walls of the room were spinning round and round; her throat seemed to be closing up so that for the moment she could not draw her breath.

Fortunately Sir Baldwin was not looking at her. He had turned to Boadicea, and was saying with his habitual pompous complacency:

"Of course a much wiser plan, my dear; or, better still, let me send the carriage for you this evening. Lieutenant Carrington will be here then, and a verbal message will come far better from your own lips than from mine."

"I thank you, Sir Baldwin!" said Boadicea demurely.

Olive, had she dared, would have gasped with horror, she would have raved, she would have protested. But fortunately for herself she had just a sufficiency of commonsense left in her to make a supreme effort to control both her rage and her fears.

"I think"— and she contrived to speak calmly, so that Boadicea alone saw the awful effort which it cost her to do so —"I think that it would be better for your letter to go first, child."

"Do you really think so, Olive?" asked Boadicea.

No one, I think, will begrudge her this tiny pin-prick of malice which she administered to her sister. She was but a girl after all, and was holding the trump card now. Triumph had exhilarated her, and it was she now who felt contempt for her sister, and who could readily have murmured: "You little fool!"

"Yes," said Olive, catching at this feeble straw of hope —"yes. Let Sir Baldwin take your letter now.

You can then easily arrange to see Lieutenant Carrington to-morrow."

Boadicea seemed to be hesitating for a moment, whilst Sir Baldwin remained coldly neutral, determined not to interfere again in women's affairs; his interference not having succeeded overwell hitherto. Olive was thus kept on tenterhooks for a few minutes. Boadicea was not cruel, but she enjoyed this moment of mental torture which she was deliberately inflicting on her sister. And even then Olive's punishment was in no way commensurate with her fault; and the worst of it for Olive was that she knew that her sister was punishing her, and that she had not the power of retaliation either now or for the future.

"I have changed my mind!" Boadicea's decision came almost as a relief; the suspense had been agonising, even the worst — and this undoubtedly was the worst that could happen — was better than the horror of anticipation.

"That's a good girl!" said Sir Baldwin cheerfully. "Now I think I had better drive back to the hotel and tell Mr. and Mrs. Hemingford that you will not join them until this evening. You stay here quietly with Olive. Have a good talk with her; she seems a little nervy this afternoon."

He was very fussy and excited. His diplomacy was succeeding overwell, after all. Olive made no attempt to stop him from going; events had come to such a pass that it did not greatly matter now who came or stayed, what anybody did or did not do.

And once more the two sisters were left alone together.

CHAPTER XXXIII

A SUBLIME CONCLUSION

Olive no longer made attempt to hide either her wrath or her fears. As soon as Sir Baldwin was safely out of earshot her piercing voice rang out, shrill and quivering.

"What is the meaning of all this nonsense?" she cried.

There was no mistaking the look of rage, nor even that of hate with which she met Boadicea's quiet glance.

"It means that I have been seeking for the truth," And Boadicea took the letter out of her pocket and held it tightly clasped between her hands. "It lies here," she said, "in this letter."

"What do you mean? Give me that letter."

"Yes. I will give it you, Olive, directly. I need not read it now."

She sat down on the corner of the sofa, just as she had done before, when some hidden power in her suggested this stroke of diplomacy which had culminated in the present situation. The letter she still clutched with both her hands. Her cheeks were glowing with suppressed excitement, her large, eager eyes followed her sister's restless walk up and down the room.

"I need not read this letter, Olive," she said. "I can read all I want in your disturbed face and in your

shrinking eyes. You lied to me, Olive. You lied when you tried to part me from the man whom I loved, and who loved me. . . . You lied when you tried to prove him false and base, a liar and a cheat. . . . You trapped and duped me — me, your own sister — the country wench whom you used as a tool for just as long as you needed her, and whose heart you broke once she herself became useless."

"Be quiet, girl!" cried Olive, in a last futile attempt to gain the mastery over the silly wench whom she used to dominate long ago. "I will not listen to all this nonsense, this impudence. . . ."

"You must listen, Olive," broke in Boadicea firmly; "you have got to listen, for it is my turn now. You have had the upper hand for so long, for you are clever and you always know what you want, and what you want that you make up your mind to get. But God gave me country wits, not much of these, I dare say. You think me a ninny and an unsophisticated savage, but I have pitted my wits against your intrigues, and it seems that my wits were the keener. I wished to know who — you or he — had lied to me. You or he! The alternative was horrible, for I loved you, Olive, and believed in you; but to him I had given my whole heart. Do you think that I really meant to send a letter to him? Not I . . . I only wanted to know, and it was my turn to lay a trap for you and to make a fool of you. . . . Yes, a fool — a miserable, cringing fool; and see how I succeeded! Your excitement, your terror, the many purposeless little lies which you had already told, had roused my suspicions — and somehow I thought of writing the letter

and then of leaving it — open — in your hands to see what you would do. I never meant to give the letter to Sir Baldwin. I had only thought out a way of finding out whether Jack Carrington had been lying to me last year, or whether you were lying to me now. Now you see that country wits are sometimes keener than town wits. You fell into my trap just like a bird. When my back was turned you stole my letter. You were terror-stricken lest he — the man whose admiration you covet for the mere gratification of your own vanity — should know how you had lied to me, and shamed yourself before me so as to part me from him. You stole my letter, Olive, and in its place you wrote another — another — with your hand. I don't know what you wrote. . . . I don't care how you put it . . . but this I know that in this envelope now lies the proof of your falsehood and of his loyalty."

It was a severe ordeal for a young girl, this act of accusation, spoken with a great effort at self-control and at dignity. Nor, whilst she was actually speaking, did that self-control and dignity forsake her. Her voice perhaps had gradually become a little more trenchant as excitement took stronger and yet stronger hold of her. She had risen to her feet, and it was Olive now who sat cowering and weeping, unable to find the requisite words with which to silence her sister's indictment against her.

But when Boadicea had finished speaking, when with every moment the conviction grew upon her that she had not been mistaken, that her sister had lied, deliberately lied to her, but that the man whom she loved had been loyal and very deeply wronged, then

for an instant her self-control entirely left her. She was only a young girl, after all — little more than a child, with a heart filled with passionate love for a man whom for a whole year she had believed a liar and a cheat.

The load of intense misery, of bitter disillusionment which she had borne silently for so long was lifted from her with amazing suddenness, and she who had never given way under the weight of so much sorrow, and such cruel disappointment, did so now with the completeness of her relief.

Her voice broke down in a great sob. Hot tears rushed to her eyes. She covered her face with her hands and crying and laughing hysterically she fell on her knees beside the sofa and murmured through her tears:

"I knew it. . . . I really knew it all the time. . . . Oh, my God, my God! I thank thee! I thank thee that he has not lied to me!"

That was the great hosanna, the heavenly pæon of gratitude that went up from her overburdened heart, straight to God the Maker of all things good. He had not lied — he was true and loyal, for this she thanked God on her knees. Nothing else mattered now, not the pain and misery of the past year, not the sister's treachery, not even the hopeless dreariness of future years! All that was as nothing, for he was just as she had thought him, true and loyal. The sky once more was beautiful and blue, the clouds but filmy gossamer of silver tissue, the nightingale had an exquisite note in its tiny throat, and the scent of cherry blossom was exquisite in its fragrance.

"Thank God, thank God, he did not lie to me!"

This mood of Boadicea's was wholly incomprehensible to the older sister, so incomprehensible, in fact, that it irritated her. She ceased her own crying, the tears of shame and of rage died in her eyes, even before they fell. At first she gazed on her sister as she would on a person who had suddenly become demented. She wiped her eyes and sat straight up in her chair. Then contempt — that innate contempt which she had always felt for the country-bred ninny — once more reasserted itself.

Bah! the child was, after all, nothing but a fool, and she — Olive — had been but a silly dolt, thus to allow herself to be cowed by a wench like that. The child was a fool, of that there was no doubt, else why should she now seem so overwhelmed with joy when in reality there was nothing yet to exult over. Nay, what's more, Olive would — even at this eleventh hour — see that nothing should occur to justify tears of gratitude and of joy.

She was not one to take a beating easily, and did not by any means consider herself beaten yet. Check to her queen — perhaps — her queen who was called self-love — but not checkmate by a long way yet.

But she waited patiently until Boadicea's paroxysm had somewhat calmed down. At last the girl rose to her feet again, and still a little hysterical, still quivering with excitement, she was drying her tears, and making quick, jerky attempts to smooth the tendrils of brown hair that clung, moist, to her temples.

By this time Olive had wholly composed herself. She was well-schooled in the art of passing from parox-

ysm of tears or anger to apparent complete indifference. She embraced her sister's elegant young figure with one contemptuous and comprehensive glance, then she said lightly:

"My dear child, let me congratulate you! Your heroics are positively wonderful!"

This sobered Boadicea completely. She was not really ashamed of her outburst before the sister who was so uncomprehending and so profoundly cynical, but she was angry with herself for having allowed that sister a peep into her simple, ardent soul. Her young face, tanned by sun and sea, beaten by the breezes of Thanet, had not learnt the art of concealing the strong emotions which surged up from the depths of her passionate and unsophisticated heart.

Olive — had she been more keenly observant — could easily have read in her sister's glowing eyes every thought that coursed through the young brain. But she cared so little what that sister thought and felt that now she merely shrugged her shoulders and said flippantly:

"Well, I admit that I have lied. What, then? I admit that I was fond of Jack Carrington. I am fond of Jack Carrington, and he is fond of me. He may have paid you some attention which your silly childish vanity construed into declarations of love, but he was and is fond of me. I lied in order to keep you away from him. What then? I admit it. There! You can call me a liar, and despise me as much as you like. But all your weeping will not bring him back to you now. I'll see to that."

Boadicea listened to Olive's cynical tirade with a

smile on her lips, and a look of supreme joy on her face. Neither joy nor smile fled from her when Olive ceased speaking.

"But he did not lie to me," she said simply.

"To-morrow he leaves in the *Dolphin* for China. You cannot stay in my house against my wish. You must go now, for I shall send you away, and you will not have the chance of seeing Lieutenant Carrington before he leaves."

Still smiling and triumphant, Boadicea repeated:

"But he did not lie to me!"

"Bah! You may never see him again. He may never return from China."

And once again came the sublime, all-embracing answer: "But he did not lie to me!"

CHAPTER XXXIV

A SIMPLE WAY

After awhile Olive left her to herself. There was nothing to be done with the girl. I think that for the first time in all these months of many and of varied intrigues she felt herself on the verge of being checkmated.

But she could no longer remain in the presence of her sister. That optimistic exultation irritated her beyond her powers of endurance. She still clung to the hope that Carrington and Boadicea need not meet this evening, and to the determination that Jack now should follow his original intention and leave for China the next day.

At any rate, she had a good many hours during which she could think things out.

Sir Baldwin had gone to Bloomsbury. At the quickest computation he could not go there and back and have a brief talk with Aunt Caroline under about an hour. No one could have a brief talk with Aunt Caroline, for she saw to it that it was anything but brief, so that in all probability Sir Baldwin would be gone over an hour, and he had left the house a quarter of an hour ago.

If Boadicea left St. James's-street in half an hour from now in a hackney coach which moved very slowly indeed she would be well out of the way before Sir

Baldwin could possibly return, and would reach the Bloomsbury hotel some time after Sir Baldwin had left it.

And surely whilst Lady Jeffreys in the meanwhile sat listening to Lady Malvern's musicians she could think out some little scheme whereby she could keep Sir Baldwin from interfering this evening when Lieutenant Carrington paid his promised visit.

Carrington would be in St. James's-street this evening, Boadicea at the Bloomsbury hotel, and that Fate would be a very malignant one indeed that did not keep those two young people apart for another twenty-four hours. As Olive had harshly intimated to her sister, the latter could not possibly remain in the house when the hostess had bade her go.

After to-night Lieutenant Jack could start for China and Boadicea for Thanet, leaving Lady Jeffreys's reputation still immaculate in Jack's eyes, even if it had been irretrievably sullied in those of her sister.

Twenty-four hours! Surely Fate was not going to deal cruelly with the prettiest woman in London at this important crisis in her life?

A little buoyed up by hope again, a little fearful, and very irate against her sister, Olive made up her mind that by far the best and simplest thing to do now would be, firstly, to order Thompson to call a hackney coach for Miss Aldmarshe in half an hour, and to direct the driver to take the young lady quietly as far as the Coptic Hotel in Bloomsbury, and after that for herself to endeavour to forget her worries in the social triumphs which awaited her at Lady Malvern's reception.

Therefore she tried resolutely to conquer that intense sense of irritation which was in her still, and which might even now have betrayed to Boadicea the fact that her sister's intriguing mind was once more in activity.

Resolutely she went to the door as if by her departure she meant to imply that she was vacating the battlefield and leaving Boadicea there alone and triumphant. At the door, however, she turned to her sister and spoke to her acidly over her shoulder:

"You will understand, child," she said, "that your presence in my house can no longer be very agreeable to me. I will instruct Thompson to call a hackney coach for you. It may be some time before he can get one, but when he does, he will instruct the driver to take you straight to the Bloomsbury hotel, where Aunt and Uncle must be getting anxious about you. You have the address, I think."

"Yes, Olive," replied Boadicea, "I have the address Sir Baldwin mentioned — the name of the hotel, the Coptic, wasn't it? I have no doubt that the coachman can find it."

"Of course he can. Good-bye, then! I may bring myself to go and see you again before you leave, for Aunt's sake, of course. She need not know how impertinently you have treated me, and how angry I am with you for your rough, bullying ways. Outwardly we can yet remain friends."

"Yes. Outwardly, Olive."

"I must go now. Your impertinence and all the nonsense that you have talked have made me miss one of the finest concerts of the season."

"I am sorry!"

"And I cannot help thinking, child, that your primary object in making all this fuss was to make mischief between Sir Baldwin and me."

"I don't think, Olive, that you will seriously believe that when you have thought the whole matter over seriously."

"I may or I may not. Good-bye now!"

"Good-bye, Olive!"

The door was opened and shut again. There was a frou-frou of silk skirts and a tripping of lightly shod feet up the carpeted stairs; and one sister passed entirely out of the life of the other.

For a second or two Boadicea was conscious of the irresistible impulse to run to the door to call after the sister whom she had once loved so dearly, whom even now she was willing, even eager to forgive. But she fought that impulse down. Nothing at this moment could be gained by making appeal to Olive's finer feelings.

With a sigh Boadicea was bound to admit that Olive had very few fine feelings in her. But what did that matter? What did anything matter since he had proved himself loyal and true.

Even if he went to China to-morrow, even if she should never see him again in life, she would never again be so hopelessly wretched as she had been in the past year. Death — his death — the most terrible thing now that her mind was able to contemplate, would not seem such a cruel thing, since she knew that he was true and loyal, and that he had not lied to her.

As — a year ago — she had sat alone in her little

room at Old Manor Farm gazing on the very abjectness of her own misery, so now she gazed upon that one great and glorious fact; he had not lied; he was true and loyal. All her belief in him was justified. The one terrestrial idol which her virgin heart had set up had not fallen to ashes and dust at her feet, and her lips had never been defiled by the kiss of a traitor.

On this she dwelt, on this her heart fed now, as probably it might have to feed for many years to come: just on the memory of that kiss, in the shadow of the big cherry-tree when the thrush sang so exultantly: "He did it! He did it!" and when the scent of tobacco flowers, pungent and intoxicating, filled the air with its exquisite fragrance.

She heard her sister's footsteps once more descending the stairs, she heard the harsh, high-pitched voice ordering a hackney coach to be brought to the door in half an hour. She heard the heavy front door opening and shutting as the fashionable Lady Jeffreys sallied forth into the streets to walk the few hundred steps which would lead her to Lady Malvern's mansion.

Then she felt the silence of the big house. She sat in the drawing-room, quite still, waiting for the hackney coach to arrive which would take her away from her sister's house, probably never to return.

Olive had passed out of her life, so no doubt would Sir Baldwin. To-morrow she thought that she could persuade Aunt and Uncle to go back to dear old Thanet, where there were no intrigues, no lies, no false appearance of affection, no lying lips, but where memory dwelt under the cherry-trees, and was kept sweet and young in the fragrance of spring flowers.

She was content thus to sit quietly, to dream and to wait. Olive had apparently ordered the coach to be brought round in half an hour. She wondered — in the same vague and dreamy way — why Olive should have wished her to wait half an hour before leaving. But it really did not matter. When thoughts are so full and the soul so far away from the body, time is of little account, and the small details of life do not really exist.

A coach eventually did drive up to the door. Boadicea heard it and made ready to go. She felt more than ever like a person in a dream, only vaguely realising that she must adjust her bonnet, tie its strings and slip on her gloves. Equally vaguely the thought crossed her mind as to what would become of Cousin Barnaby.

"Olive will turn him out of the house to-morrow for certain. She is not in a mood to care about Mr. Crabtree's tantrums." And she smiled in an absent, dreamy kind of way, as she pictured to herself Barnaby Crabtree being hastily and unceremoniously bundled out of the house.

She thought every minute that Thompson would come in and tell her that the hackney coach was at the door, and she was, in the meanwhile, struggling with a recalcitrant glove.

Presently she heard Sir Baldwin's voice down below. He had evidently returned once again from Bloomsbury. His coachman must have driven very quickly, for Boadicea had an idea that Bloomsbury was a very long way off.

Still, she was glad that Sir Baldwin had returned,

and that she would be able to say "Good-bye" to him before she left. Sir Baldwin had been very kind all along, and even the severity of his judgment on her was due to the kindness of his heart.

A man's footsteps were heard ascending the stairs very quickly. It was Sir Baldwin, of course; and the coach was at the door, and she must really go now.

Then the door was thrown open, and it was not Sir Baldwin who was standing there.

At first Boadicea thought that it was all part of her dream, because she was quite sure that in the background behind Jack's head she could see the old cherry-tree and the sunshine glinting through the fruit-laden branches; she was equally sure that she could smell the delicious fragrance of those tobacco plants which were planted in the shade over against the north side of Old Manor Farm, whilst nobody could doubt that the very air was vibrating with the song of innumerable thrushes who repeated the glorious pæon of joy: "He did it! He did it!"

But, of course, all that was nonsense, and Boadicea laughed aloud at herself for being so silly and so fanciful. Did she not know that she was in a London house, in her sister's drawing-room, very far away from the old orchard in Thanet?

But she also was in the arms of the man whom she loved, of the man who throughout had been true and loyal. It was his kiss that was as sweet as the scent of the flowers; it was his voice that murmured in her ear:

"My Meadowsweet!"

"I wonder if you will ever understand?" she whis-

pered shyly. "It was all such a hideous, such a horrible mistake. But it was all my fault, and I shall never be able to explain. I wonder if you will forgive and never try to understand?"

"I wonder?" he said simply.

A quarter of an hour later Sir Baldwin ventured to disturb them. He sighed a little wistfully when he saw them sitting side by side, hand against hand, and, unseen by him, soul to soul.

"I did not go to the hotel after all," he said in explanation of his sudden return. "I went to fetch Carrington at his lodgings, which were close by. I thought it would be the simplest way out of our many difficulties."

And it had been by far the simplest way.

THE END

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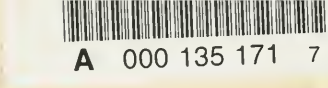
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